

**The British Response to
Abstract Expressionism of the USA c.1950-1963**

A thesis presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
University of Newcastle upon Tyne

by

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To my parents

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Abstract

Abstract Expressionism was arguably the most important art movement after the Second World War and it has in many ways influenced all subsequent art movements in the West. This thesis investigates the presence of Abstract Expressionism in Britain and responses to it in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Abstract Expressionism was presented to the British public through literature and exhibitions by individual Americans and by American institutions after 1947, but it was not until 1956 that Abstract Expressionist paintings became accessible in any quantity. While it was denounced by many, it won sympathies from two main groups of artists: firstly, established painters who were exploring the incorporation of abstract form with imagery from landscape and figure, and secondly, the younger generation of art students. The British constructivists were unaffected.

For these established painters, Abstract Expressionism was more of a pure inspiration than a stylistic stereotype. A few of them experienced dramatic changes of style as a result, while others showed a very restricted interest in it. The real impact was on the young artists. Under the influence of the Independent Group, which helped in generating an awareness of a new urbanism in London, they treated Abstract Expressionism and its later development Post-Painterly Abstraction, as an authentic reflection of contemporary society. They were not only eager to contribute to it but also to embrace it as their own.

At the end of the 1950s, the majority of critics had accepted current status of Abstract Expressionism. Its two major British critics, Patrick Heron and Lawrence Alloway, were activists on the contemporary art scene. Heron restricted his argument by what was essentially a combination of the painting qualities that Roger Fry had qualified and the idealism of the 1930s abstraction promoted by Herbert Read. Alloway, on the other hand, successfully exploited Abstract Expressionism to promote a new British movement. His ideas, inspired by Abstract Expressionism as well as American consumerism, popular culture, science and technology, were embraced by young artists.

British art was thus transformed in the 1960s, to a urbanism-inspired art, which came from the 'real' world and was receptive to its influence, rather than retreating into landscape, a psychological inner world or the realms of artistic idealism.

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Introduction

The artistic achievement of Abstract Expressionism, as recognised in the late fifties and early sixties, has been in dispute since the early seventies. During the process of this rethinking the influence of politics and government policies on Abstract Expressionism is emphasised perhaps excessively and so is the use made of Abstract Expressionism by the American governments in the Cold War. Although studies as such do enormously contribute to our understanding of Abstract Expressionism, more as a phenomenon than art, it seems that there is a danger that the critics' subsequent insight is to be taken as the artists' original intention.

In Europe also there was a trend to reassess this emergence of post-war American art and to analyse critically the process of its recognition. In general, America was criticised for valuing itself too highly and for ignoring the achievements of contemporary European art. Abstract Expressionism, as the first internationally important American art movement and the foundation of almost all later American achievements, was the primary target set by all the critics of the Americans. While there were echoes of various criticisms of Abstract Expressionism in America, the bulk of European criticism of Abstract Expressionism questions simply whether it was qualitatively a better art. This revealed the fact that the Europeans were never thoroughly convinced of the artistic achievements American critics had claimed for Abstract Expressionism, even after nearly four decades.

The editorial of *Modern Painters*, No. 10, Summer 1989, for example, was devoted to a retrospective of the relation between art in post-war Britain and the United States and it was entitled 'Special Relationship?' By questioning the qualification of a phrase used mainly

in politics, which was first applied by Churchill during the Second World War, the editorial attempted to challenge the underpins of post-war American art.¹ The position taken by the editor of *Modern Painters* was in line with the European critical stance towards American art.

To explore further the phrase 'special relationship' may help to establish a proper context for this thesis, which attempts to reconstruct the British reception of and response to Abstract Expressionism. The phrase has real substance only in its original application. Political and economic reality set the tone for the relationship between Britain and the United States. The Churchill government had been seeking strong allies as soon as it realised that Britain alone, with the rest of Europe already in the hands of the Nazis, was not going to win the war. America was the only direction to which it could turn - America had the potential to alter the course of the war. The Churchill government succeeded and thereafter a co-operative relationship between the by-going and the incoming world powers started. In consideration of British interests at home and abroad, subsequent British governments were fixed on the policy to maintain the closest possible relationship with the United States. The financial and political support of the United States was essential for Britain to realise the post war reconstruction programmes at home and to maintain its overseas interests abroad. The British governments inclined to be suspicious of its European neighbours and leaning to America seemed for them a more comfortable option, and, this special relationship with America was awesome to both enemies and friends. Only when Edward Heath came into office and realised the danger of being excluded from a consolidating EEC, did Britain start to work together with other European countries.

For America, who had secured a leading role in the post-war world, an intimate relationship with Britain could best serve their interests in Europe and Western interests in Far East and Middle East where British

influence was shrinking but far from vanished. Further more, Britain had been a reliable, willing and, perhaps more appreciably, stable partner to work with in combating the worldwide spread of communism.

Britain could also return the favour as there were still remnants of the British empire available. America was allowed and even encouraged to increase its influence in the South East Asia while Britain restrained itself in the Middle East and, eventually the Wilson government asked America to share the resources of the Middle East oil-producing countries. It was on the basis of mutual benefit that Britain and the United States willingly maintained the special relationship.

On the other hand, Britain had suffered the least American interventions among the major European countries. Britain retained more independence, politically and economically. There was a sharp contrast between the situation in Britain and that in France. The scale and level of American intervention in the internal affairs in France was certainly out of question in Britain. The political system of the Fourth Republic facilitated external influence.² America hoped for a stable French regime, free of either of the extremes represented by the Communists, dangerously strong in the American view, and de Gaulle, whose political programme they tended to equate with fascism. The multiplicity of parties and the instability of cabinets afforded astute American ambassadors unprecedented leverage for intervening directly in French political crises.³

This comoradeship between Britain and America during the war and their continued special relationship may have helped to constitute for the British a healthier psyche compared with that of the French, Italian and German, when they started to deal with the flooding of American culture and art into Europe which was resulted by America's effort in seeking a matching status in the arts as the one in politic, economy and military that it had found recently. At the same time the intensifying

Cold War gave America the extra motivation in promoting and celebrating the rise of American art as part of its cultural output. So that there were well calculated activities promoting American art in Europe throughout the fifties. Various American enterprises also launched American culture in Europe: the American School in Paris was set up immediately after the war; American film, already established pre-war, came back aggressively and provoked protest and severe criticism in France in particular; exhibitions of American contemporary art increased steadily. Sometimes cultural activities combined with commercial interests and vice versa. Hollywood, for example, purged itself of radicalism in order to placate anti-Americanism, and turned to apolitical and often mindless forms of entertainment whilst it was interested in recapturing its pre-war export markets there. And Coca-Cola, a popular American product marketed by mass advertising, was 'the most American thing in America,' and every bottle of Coca-Cola contained the 'essence of capitalism' and carried a symbolic importance as manifestation of the superiority of the American 'way of life.'⁴ A fitting symbol of the consumer society, it was a symbol of anticommunism as well.

Abstract Expressionism completed so far the range of American cultural production on offer. Abstract Expressionism is a powerful, extraordinary and distinctive species of art. It is a symbol of another side of American life or ideology - individualism, commitment, seriousness, energy, creativity and freedom. The characteristic ambiguity of the Abstract Expressionist painting proved most significant in its usage as a Cold War weapon. It is a kind art that leaves critics the great flexibility and sphere to manoeuvre. It is also remarkably different from those social realistic paintings produced in the communist block whose governments operated under severe and rigid orthodox Leninist principles. So that, whether or not the artists had anything to do with

any post-war American politics, their works could be, and were in fact exploited by the USA governments or its agents effortlessly.

Before Abstract Expressionism was fully recognised in the United States, some leading American critics and art dealers pioneered in exporting it to Europe. Serge Guilbaut argued that:

The problem for the American avant-garde artists (and here Guilbaut does not mean only the artists, but also their critics and museum supporters) was first to convince a portion of the home public that their work was as sophisticated as that of any European modern master. But the other step, of course, was to convince the Europeans of the American qualities. That would prove to be more difficult.⁵

In fact the two steps were combined into one, for, the approval of the new American painting from the European would effectively convince the 'portion of home public.' American critics and dealers approached public and private galleries in major capitals in Europe and went to influential European critics, for example Michel Tapié in France and Patrick Heron in England, and to institutions. In London the first Abstract Expressionist paintings were exhibited at the Institute of Contemporary Art, the single British institution in fine art that, perhaps strangely, but also actively sought American patrons.

Paris, the most prestigious cultural centre, was the showcase most sought after by America. The early 1950s was not a good time for abstract artists in Paris. The Parisian art galleries were virtually closed to non-figurative art and especially to younger abstract artists. There were few publications that concerned contemporary art. Articles on contemporary art appeared only casually in *Art d'aujourd'hui*. Charles Estienne had a column in *Combat* and Georges Boudaille was allowed to

write small articles in *Les Lettres Françaises*.⁶ The Art Informale painters had not attracted much critical attention and kept a low profile. It was at this time Abstract Expressionism started to be known in Paris. During the earliest Abstract Expressionist painting exhibition provided by Samuel Kootz at Galerie Maeght in 1946, Estienne praised a certain poetic aspect, typically American, in the works of Hans Hofmann.⁷ Peggy Guggenheim took her collection of early Abstract Expressionist painting to Europe. Michel Tapié also brought Jackson Pollock to Paris, at Fachetti's in Paris in the early 1950s. Sam Francis arrived in Paris in the early 1950s and quickly made a name for himself in France and Switzerland. The arrival of the important American modern art exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne in 1956 caused a tremendous sensation in Parisian art world, as it did in the Tate Gallery in London, although it was vehemently attacked by *Beaux-Arts* and *Les Lettres Française*.⁵

To dominate internationally in the domain of art and literature, America gave strategic priority to Paris. But the British had done more in promoting Abstract Expressionism, as well as American popular culture. The presentation and reception of Abstract Expressionism in the UK was in a context different to that of continental Europe. The British as a heroic nation winning the War, had a somewhat healthier psyche at the time than its European counterparts. This allowed the British artists and critics to embrace American art with minimum prejudice. In the early fifties British artists had no serious concerns about the threat from the communist block, nor any appetite for international politics. For example, Alfred Barr's right wing rhetoric of 'freedom' in his lecture at the V & A Museum in 1953 hardly found echoes in Britain. By contrast, in France and Italy where political scandals and inter-party conflicts were prominent phenomena, artists too played politics.⁸ Awareness of political 'correctness' must have effected their view of all American phenomena including new painting.

Another feature was particular to Britain in this context: the British and the American share the same tongue thus permitting an informed audience in Britain for the writings of American authors which was much larger than that in France; British critics, such as Patrick Heron and Lawrence Alloway and others could readily participate in discussions with American critics. Finally the rhetoric of a 'special relationship' between the British and American governments certainly helped to relieve any suspicions of America, if there were any. Anti-American sentiment, furious in France and Italy as one could observe from time to time, was never so in Britain. It was quite appropriate under such auspicious circumstances that the Institute of Contemporary Art Managing Committee proposed to the American Embassy that London be the gateway to Europe for American art and culture.⁹

The Institute of Contemporary Art, and the Arts Council actually functioned at times as agencies introducing American art to the British public. There were many examples of their cooperation with the Americans, including those important American exhibitions held in Britain in the fifties. Not only did they help the Americans in launching exhibitions and spreading information about the new American art and culture but also gave official recognition and additional encouragement to artists following or seemingly following this particular trend.

The interaction of politics and government policies of the time with the promotion of Abstract Expressionism has been emphasised perhaps excessively. But the British perception of Abstract Expressionism also had to do with the artistic heritage in Britain, the past abstract art movements in particular.

Britain did not produce masters of abstract art of the status of Kandinsky or Mondrian during the exciting early period of modernist art despite those British painters who explored these domains for a while. However, the theories of Roger Fry and Clive Bell, which were largely

derived from the paintings by Cézanne and addressed forms of painting exclusively, proved significant. Their discourse had successfully cultivated a familiarity with the kind of painterly quality that can be found in Cézanne and Matisse. British painters growing up during the twenties and thirties looked at Cézanne's paintings with reverence, and all major critics simply have to acknowledge Fry's techniques in analysing forms and his pictorial taste. For example Herbert Read, the most prominent critic and supporter of the abstract art in the thirties and the forties, embarked an assault on Fry's formalist theory while he had to appreciate Fry's subtlety in analysis of forms. Fry's legacy extended well into the fifties through the pen and brushes of the painter and critic Patrick Heron who was almost alone, but eloquently, practising formalist criticism in the fifties.

The second phase of development of abstract art in Britain started in some way as a part of the international movement Abstraction Creation centred in Paris. It was a sustained movement and strengthened at a later stage by the refugees from Europe including Mondrian, Naum Gabo and Moholy-Nagy among others. Abstract art was firmly established during this period and the practice of abstract art by these artists, and their supporter Read, made the 'foundation' for what was to come in the next quarter of the century.¹⁰ Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth were the most important artists in the movement and they developed their respective schemes to synthesise abstract forms from their sensation in nature. Their schemes continued to be perfected (in particular in Hepworth's case) after they moved to Cornwall where a few major abstract painters of next generation rose, under the auspicious support from Nicholson, Hepworth and Gabo.

The short lived *Objective Abstraction* in the mid-thirties failed as a movement because, as one of its participants asserted, it had no 'context.'¹¹ Such an irrational, spontaneous mode of working may be ahead

of its time. Its abbreviated existence in the thirties was only a measure of the desire for a new taste after years of developing the geometric abstract art. Their unrecognised attempts anticipated in many ways the fifties' experiments, when the sentiment had changed in favour of this kind of faculty. Rodrigo Moynihan, one of the *Objective Abstraction* participants, revitalised his creativity again in the mid-fifties. Ivon Hitchens, another participant, evolved from landscape his lyrical and sensuous, while extremely simple combination of brushwork since the early thirties. He was later a forceful influence in the fifties.

Victor Pasmore, again a veteran of *Objective Abstraction*, and whose works in that exhibition did still include recognisable imagery, engaged with abstraction seriously after the war. Pasmore was experimenting with a method emphasising spontaneity as well as the dialectic relation between forms. Pasmore, for a short time, bridged pre-war geometric abstraction and the much freer abstraction in the fifties both by his own works and his influence on others. Pasmore had a decisive influence on Terry Frost, a major non-figurative painter in the fifties, when the latter was studying under him between 1948 and 1950. His teaching cultivated Frost's appetite for lyrical, free, imaginative drawing and painting (elsewhere, it seems such taste and techniques came from Surrealist automatism that never found its place in Britain). The followers of Pasmore in London and Nicholson and Gabo in Cornwall emerged after the war as the most promising trend to challenge the dominance of the Neo-Romanticism and realism. Within a few years they quickly reached a viable state as recorded by Lawrence Alloway in his *Nine Abstract Artists* in 1954.¹²

At approximately this time Abstract Expressionist painting began to be felt in London, as mentioned before. What needs to be emphasised is that the discussions of Abstract Expressionism in Britain were predominantly formal. The majority of American artists later identified

with Abstract Expressionism had taken lessons from the various European modernist schools, particularly Cubist and Surrealist, although rarely from their nearest predecessor the purist or geometric abstract art movement which had a presence in America. British artists and critics who were pro-Abstract Expressionism had associations with abstract art of the thirties at some stages but they certainly did not intend to follow it. Rightly they did not associate Abstract Expressionism with the international abstract movement of the thirties and, in fact, such a relationship does not exist. On the other hand, they neglected important elements in Abstract Expressionism that had its origins in America. Apart from the general social and political circumstances discussed previously, there are other reasons. One of them is that the works by Abstract Expressionists available to British artists in the beginning were their mature works only; although Alan Davie exceptionally saw more early Abstract Expressionist works. This left possible areas of misunderstanding of the nature of Abstract Expressionism as the mature works are usually much more remote from their origins than the formative works. Furthermore, Abstract Expressionist painting was misunderstood because of the fact that its close connection with Surrealism was discarded in American critical writing after it gained the status as an independent development in America. We know the American theorist Harold Rosenberg, joined later by Thomas B. Hess, was responsible for how the British perceived Abstract Expressionism in the early days and these two did not deal with Surrealism in most of their published writings. Rosenberg, himself a Surrealist poet, did not address connections between Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism in his influential article 'American Action Painters' which was much used as a source by British critics. Clement Greenberg, the all important formalist critic of Abstract Expressionism, did not have any serious interest in Surrealism and conveniently kept it out from his system of stylistic evaluation.

Thus he rarely mentioned the connection between Abstract Expressionism and Surrealism in his writing.

In the very early literature about Abstract Expressionism written by British critics the Surrealist connection was at stake, for example, in Denys Sutton's report of American art in *Horizon* in 1949.¹³ In so far Abstract Expressionism had not yet attracted much attention from the European art world and Sutton's article was neglected. Herbert Read also had analysed Abstract Expressionist paintings with regard to Surrealism but, as he was at the time not certain in his attitude to the new American painting, as well as the similar trend in Europe, he explained it in terms of rather pure psychological analysis based on Freud and Jung. The important contributions, in relation to the contemporary avant garde art practice, were either the renewed formalist approach by Heron or the 'fine art/popular culture continuum' as championed by Alloway and his circle. Heron and Alloway had contributed a considerable amount of writing on Abstract Expressionism but neither had paid much attention to its connection with Surrealism.

In the fifties Heron wrote art criticism mainly for *New Statesman and Nation* and later *Arts* New York. The overtone of Heron's criticism is formalist, as he was influenced by the formalist theory of Fry, and he himself is a painter. Heron treated Abstract Expressionism as a stylistic development or breakthrough after Analytical Cubism. The weakness Heron found in Abstract Expressionist painting was in its colour and pictorial composition. These were left to Heron and other Middle Generation painters to explore.¹⁴ He believed that he and his fellow painters were in a more advantageous position to explore areas beyond Abstract Expressionism, because they as Europeans were superior to the Americans in question. Heron's theory was eventually formulated, during the course of 1958 and 1974, by following a formalist line of development in modern painting. It sometime overlaps that of Greenberg's but it is not as rigid

and it occasionally lacks consistency. It is obvious that Heron, as an art practitioner, generated criticism of Abstract Expressionism with regard to problems faced by him and his generation of artists. This sometimes jeopardised his explanation of Abstract Expressionism.

Lawrence Alloway was one of the few English critics who contributed a larger proportion of his total output to Abstract Expressionism. He seems to have approached Abstract Expressionism mainly under the influence of Rosenberg and Hess before 1958. After he visited the United States, the first time in 1958, he was able to offer a more balanced account of the subject. Like Heron, Alloway's criticism was subjected to his primary concern with issues about contemporary British art, although he saw them from a different perspective from that of Heron's. He would reveal or exclude certain elements of Abstract Expressionism in order to champion particular British artists or artist groups. At other times he may deliberately have made connections between young British abstract artists and Abstract Expressionism, in an attempt to provide a spring-board on which the young artists could catch up and surpass their immediate predecessors - the Middle Generation artists. Abstract Expressionism, along with American popular culture, science and technology, were used in much of his writing between 1958 and 1962 as references to distinguish Hard-Edge painting from the dual-read abstract/landscape paintings by the Middle Generation and from constructivism. It was important that both Alloway and Heron upheld a strong nationalist point of view. Sometimes they praised some aspects of American painting against the relative conservatism of much of the 1940's Paris School and at other times they would emphasis the European superiority in pictorial art that came exactly from Paris at the time.

The majority of authors who supported Abstract Expressionism introduced it to their home audience by adopting terminology from the original American critics and their task was, at times, reduced to the

dissemination of the theories and ideas developed in the United States. Towards the end of the fifties Clement Greenberg became increasingly prominent after winning the critical battle with Rosenberg. The result was that the discussion of Abstract Expressionism in the United States became more and more formalist dominated. Greenberg became a much more influential figure than Rosenberg and this led in Britain a further emphasis on issues concerning formal evolution. As one can see Greenberg's theory of formal reduction was largely alive in the writings of Alloway and his fellow critic Roger Coleman. In fact, the subsequent British development seemed to justify such theories. Greenberg became directly involved with British abstract art by lending his support and encouragement to the sculptor Anthony Caro, who later became an internationally acclaimed British artist. In return, Caro's success supported the claims of Greenberg's theory.

Whilst Abstract Expressionism was still deplored by the majority of British critics it was in fact a group of British artists who first approved of it. The formal properties of Abstract Expressionist painting prompted their praise and, sometimes, criticism. The Middle Generation abstract artists met the Americans while they were in their mid-career and were working in a mode that could easily adopt Abstract Expressionism. Their favourable response to the Americans was vital for an American assumption of the recognition of Abstract Expressionism in Europe. The formal characteristics of the Abstract Expressionist painting, especially the gestural Abstract Expressionist painting - its sheer size, obvious evidence of energy and the sense of paint as materials - were appealing. Alan Davie was the first British artist to recognise the new American painting (as early as 1948-49) and to put into practice the techniques of mobilising a canvas surface which he learned from the early Pollocks. Bryan Wynter was influenced by Mark Tobey's paintings after he saw the latter's exhibition at the ICA in 1955. Heron

had started to animate his Braque-like composition by inserting a independent pictorial plane of patches and strokes. Subsequently he wrote an appreciative report on the *Modern Art from the United States*, Tate Gallery in 1956 for an American audience, in *Arts* New York. Such a pictorial plane in Heron's painting was symptomatic of the influence of Tobey and Sam Francis.

The encounters with Abstract Expressionism at that particular time caused dramatic changes, mainly in style, to Davie, Heron and Wynter, although they did not simply imitate the Americans. As a matter of fact, they took advantage of this newly obtained freedom and sooner or later reached their respective mature personal styles. In the meantime, a few other Middle Generation painters, including William Scott, Peter Lanyon and Terry Frost among others, had the same degree of awareness of the development in the United States but stayed with their present agenda. Nevertheless, they showed, at times, an awareness of the trend in their bolder, brighter and larger paintings. The influence of the American on them was a subtle one. In general, the Middle Generation artists' response to the Americans was on an individual basis.

Many younger painters in the mid-fifties, including those who became the leading abstract painters in the sixties, were immediate followers of the gestural Abstract Expressionists. As many of those young artists affiliated themselves with the Independent Group at the ICA, they were led to a new kind of reasoning. The Independent Group was an effective discussion forum about contemporary art and raised many issues in the fifties. Its broad concern with culture in the post-war new era rather than mere fine art, had no equivalent anywhere. The young artists' contact with members of the Independent Group was beneficial. The Independent Group opened their eyes to a very wide variety of visual sources.

American contemporary art could be accessed more widely towards the end of the decade. The glossy American magazines increased their circulation in Britain and were readily available. There were more American exhibitions and even travelling to America was much easier than before. Young British artists watched carefully for further developments in the United States. The celebrated colour field paintings of Newman, Rothko and Still and the Hard-Edge paintings of Ellsworth Kelly in the United States between 1958 and 1960 seemed to have presented an irresistible new international movement. Even more significantly, their simple, plain visual language perfectly matched with the visual environment the British artists found in a continuously urbanising London. So that in the last couple of years of the fifties many of those young artists who once followed the gestural Abstract Expressionist painting now turned to Hard-Edge painting, one after another.

William Turnbull, who by age belongs to the Middle Generation but who worked with and influenced his juniors, made the move prior to anyone else. He was soon followed by Robyn Denny, Ralph Rumney, Richard Smith and John Hoyland among others. In a few years they, together with artists devoted more to Pop art, had taken the place of the Middle Generation abstract painters and the constructivists as avant gardists. Their new status was verified by the well-known post-war avant-garde activities like *Place* (the ICA 1959) and the *Situation* exhibitions (The RBA Galleries 1960, Marlborough New London Galleries 1961, Arts Council 1962). On the other hand, those who still remained gestural or action painters such as William Green, who had gained most publicity among his fellow radical students in Royal College of Art in 1956 and 1957, became marginalised in the early sixties.

Between 1955-56 and 1960 there were many changes in the practice of art in Britain that accompanied with the growing-up of the young

generation. These changes should perhaps be related with the upsurge of American art on an international scale. The most important change is perhaps that, in the sixties, the new generation avant garde artists, unlike all mainstream modern British artists preceding them, had basically no intention to tie themselves with Parisian art or its art world. It was rare in modern history for a major development in Britain to be associated with an art movement in a country other than France. The situation shows a transition of cultural prominence from Paris to New York. The occurrence of the transition is perhaps best seen in Britain for Britain was a third party and, more importantly, for London is 'Between Paris and New York.'¹⁵

It is interesting to see how British artists turned their eyes from Paris to New York for inspiration. For decades British artists were habitually attracted to the Parisian art world. When the war was over French art produced during the war was eagerly looked at by British artists and the large exhibitions of modern masters such as Matisse and Picasso were highly successful. The new members of the Paris School, including Dubuffet, de Staël, Giacometti and others were also introduced to the British, but their showcases were much less grand than those of their predecessors, who for some time still commanded the admiration of British painters and critics. The Americans intruded briskly. Before the *Modern Art from the United States* exhibition at the Tate in 1956, not many had the chance to view American contemporary paintings while some American critics' sometimes arrogant, excessive critical acclaim were already heard. While such claims certainly helped the success of the series of American exhibitions, some Americans worked hard to secure support from the receiving end. At least we know that Clement Greenberg came to London to lobby Heron for support.¹⁶ As soon as he had access to Abstract Expressionist paintings in the 1956 American modern art exhibition, Heron had decided in his review that from now on he and his

colleagues would watch New York as eagerly as they would have watched Paris.¹⁷ The situation changed so rapidly between 1956 and 1960 so that New York become much more important than Paris in the minds of the young British avant garde artists. They not only kept their eyes on New York but regarded personal experience of New York as a distinct advantage, in exactly the same way as the generations of their predecessors regarded that in Paris. They were anxious to visit or even study for long periods in New York. In London the hot topics of the conversation in avant garde artist circles had been about contemporary American art rather than French art. It seems that the presence of some influential Parisian avant garde artists in London in the late fifties, like Geogie Mathieu and Yves Klien among others, came as a confirmation of developments in New York.

Their experiences with Abstract Expressionism and American art at large also caused profound changes in attitude to art and the art profession. For example, younger generation artists' enthusiasm about the urban life in London was inspired largely by their direct or indirect experience of American cities; a large proportion of them became interested in oriental thought and art (especially that of the pacific region), as a result of their study of Abstract Expressionist painting which bears a certain influence of oriental art. The most benefit was perhaps gained from the American brand of professionalism as exhibited by Gottlieb and Motherwell. The younger generation artists not only mastered the tactic of causing or presenting controversies, as shown on the occasions of *Place* and *Situation*, but also strived to retain the overall control of the promotion of their art.

The relationship between post-war British abstract painting and Abstract Expressionism, and its successor in the sixties, are essential topics of any discussion about British art in the period, although it has been dealt with in a casual manner in most cases. It was not until the

early sixties that British critics started to document the process of 'the American invasion and the British response.'¹⁸ Norbert Lynton's article 'British Painting and American influence' of 1963, one of the earliest, was basically a review of published and broadcast materials on American art (mainly Abstract Expressionism) in Britain.¹⁹ Alan Bowness' essay a few years later was a personal record of American exhibitions in Britain and Europe - a perfect complement to Lynton's - and his personal experience of the London art scene with special reference to the influence of Abstract Expressionism. John Russell, who later migrated to New York, also published his observation of the American presence in London in the few articles he wrote for *Art in America*, presumably for an American audience.²⁰

While Bowness used the word 'American invasion' in the title he did not mean anything of American cultural imperialism in the way that Heron used the term at that time. In fact Heron was the one who had produced the most substantial defence of his generation against the alleged American influences. Heron's defence of British artists, mainly the Middle Generation artists (the younger generation never bothered or needed to do so) started in 1966 when he resumed his critical writing. Heron's vow of keeping out of critical writing since 1958 came to an end because he felt an obligation to protest the chauvinism of certain American critics. From 'The Ascendancy of London' in 1966 to the controversies and well-known series of 'British Influence on New York' in *The Guardian* in 1974 Heron vigorously defended himself and other St Ives painters whose connection with Abstract Expressionism was to some degree abused by some American and British critics. Heron's criticism of the Americans was in coincidence with the waves of accusation from Europe of American cultural imperialism in the late sixties - at a time when America was in trouble, both domestically and internationally, and was extremely unpopular. Heron inevitably adopted some political terms in his

vocabulary but nonetheless he made his argument by lavish formal analysis. The most extraordinary assertion in Heron's articles is that, as the title suggested, the famous New York painters, rather than the British painters in a remote artist's colony in Cornwall, were the followers who had been influenced. This is still extraordinary given that Abstract Expressionism and Post Painterly Abstraction had and have for so long been perceived as the most adventurous and authentic art of post-war era. It is understandable that Heron's argument in those articles seemed never to have any response from American critics while successive British critics such as Peter Fuller, whose aesthetics differs fundamentally from that of Heron's, continuously made references to them.

Heron and others attempted in their argument to differentiate British artists from the Americans. Some patterns of comparison between American and British paintings in the period have been established in these discussions. By contrast American art critics tended otherwise to overlook the differences - a fact that also indicates the defensive position held by the British. One of the characteristics of British painting was its association with landscape - not landscape as the object of painting but as visual and spiritual inspiration, in opposition to the Abstract Expressionist painting that was perceived as an urban experience. Actually the same thought, vice versa, was also applied by Alloway and his circles to distinguish the younger generation from the Middle Generation artists in the late fifties. A view strongly held by many British critics was that the artist's visual expression was bound by his visual environment. It was perhaps best illustrated by Brandon Taylor in his essay on Heron and the writings of Heron himself.²¹ Much of the effort to differentiate British artists from the Americans also went to the analysis of their respective formal properties. For example, the former inclined to asymmetry in composition while the latter preferred symmetry; the former normally had tonal colours while the latter did not;

the former retained purposely a hand-painted quality while the latter avoided doing so, etc. Alloway and his colleagues went further still and used another set of concepts such as perceptual ambiguity, illusion and spatial communication, to differentiate the new abstract paintings by younger avant garde artists from their American prototypes, and from the Middle Generation painters.

Comparisons as such were all relevant and they were especially appropriate when used in the studies of individual artists. What was left unanswered, it seems, is how the impact from Abstract Expressionism functioned or affected individual artists' progress. Or in other words what was the nature of that influence? Abstract Expressionism in the fifties, was considered in conceptual terms. The technical merits of its members did not explain its significance. To the receivers of this art, it was initially compelling experience rather than a study of pictorial refinement. It is the kind painting that is, in technical terms, too easy to repeat. Abstract Expressionism did not allow further evolution, as it was an end itself.

It seems appropriate to say that Abstract Expressionism in general provided the much needed impetus for a few major Middle Generation painters to break with the predominant pictorial taste derived from Cézanne and Matisse as promoted by Fry and Bell. As far as the younger generation artists were concerned they simply joined the stream. Whilst their development was almost simultaneous with that of Abstract Expressionism itself, they found their own destinations. The movement was adopted to the cultural setting of Britain and hence the movement became their own.

It seems, in many cases, that British artists and critics had taken Abstract Expressionism for their own convenience. Rosenberg described in his essay on de Kooning that, the works of art of great importance in the past (that Abstract Expressionism is such art is still

in doubt) were usually treated as pure artefacts isolated from the cultural and political context of the time. Abstract Expressionism was looked at in Britain largely in the same way, for a solution to the problems of British artists at that time.

In the main text following, Chapter 1 and 2 will provide information about the developments of abstract art before the fifties in Britain and the USA respectively. These are not comprehensive surveys of the complex movements over such a long period; rather, they are intended to provide points of reference. Where necessary comparisons between American and British movements are made in order to highlight the differences that are instrumental to the understanding of the subject of the thesis. Chapter 3 has a rather simple task to record the presentation of Abstract Expressionism in Britain in the fifties and early sixties. The remaining chapters discuss the responses of British artists and critics to Abstract Expressionism and its later developments: Chapter 4 is devoted to the Middle Generation, some of whom were the earliest supporters of Abstract Expressionist painting (although with reservation all the time) - they played an important role in raising the status of Abstract Expressionism; Chapter 5 discusses the influence of Abstract Expressionism and Post-Painterly Abstraction on a group of young British artists who formed a major group of creative personalities of the sixties; Chapter 6 reviews British critics' reception of Abstract Expressionism and its literature. Patrick Heron and Lawrence Alloway are major subjects in this discussion.

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- 1 'Editorial', *Modern Painters*, No.10, Summer 1989.
 - 2 After a brief period of a strong provisional executive power under de Gaulle from 1944-46, the resurgent parties wrote a new constitution that reproduced many of the unstable features of the prewar regime.
 - 3 Other means used by the American used include direct influence upon and manipulation of French public opinion. A final manifestation of American influence lay in the realm of mass culture. Much of what passed and passes for Americanisation in France is, instead, modernisation. France could not avoid becoming more like America as it adopted the trappings of the consumer society. Americans did attempt to influence directly the shaping of the French mentality by the export of films, the exemplary presence of the American military, and the investments by American businesses in France. But neither the cultivation of the media nor the attempts at the Coca-colonisation of French tastes in soft drinks were especially successful or significant. Of greater importance were the export of American methods to increase productivity through technical assistance programmes, and the emergence of the American model as one suitable for emulation, for imitation by French modernizers. Washington tried to steer French modernization efforts toward its own model of free enterprise. But the French pursued their own efforts in the more structured framework of the Monnet Plan.
 - 4 As quoted in Wall, Irwin M., *The United States and the making of postwar France 1945-1954*, Cambridge University Press, 1991.
 - 5 Serge Guilbaut, 'Post war painting games,' *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris and Montreal 1945-1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut, The MIT Press, 1990, p.33.
 - 6 John-Franklin Koenig, 'Abstract chaud in Paris in the 1950s,' *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris and Montreal 1945-1964*, ed., Serge Guilbaut, The MIT Press, 1990.
 - 7 Serge Guilbaut, *How New York stole the idea of modern art*, The University of Chicago Press, 1983.
 - 8 See Serge Guilbaut, 'Post war painting games,' *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris and Montreal 1945-1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut, The MIT Press, p. 32.
 - 9 The ICA Memo, 1956, Tate Gallery Archive.
 - 10 Herbert Read, 'A Nest of Gentle Artists,' catalogue to the exhibition *Art in Britain 1930-1940 Centred around Axis, Circle, Unit One*,

Marlborough Fine Art, March-April 1965, originally published in *Apollo*, September 1962.

11 Rodrigo Moynihan, 'A Nonconformist, William Goldstream interviewed by Rodrigo Moynihan,' *Art and Literature*, Lausanne, Spring 1965.

12 Lawrence Alloway, *Nine Abstract Artists*, Tiranti, 1954.

13 Denys Sutton, 'The Challenge of American Art,' *Horizon*, Oct. 1949.

14 Middle Generation as a term was first used by Heron for an exhibition of work by himself, Roger Hilton, and Bryan Wynter at the Waddinton Galleries in May 1959. The term was used loosely in the thesis to include a larger number of painter^s of similar age and working mode.

15 Margaret Garlake, 'Between Paris and New York: critical constructions of "Englishness,"' in Malcolm Gee, ed., *Art Criticism Since 1900*, Manchester University Press, 1990.

16 Patrick Heron, 'The British influence on New York I,' *The Guardian*, 10, Oct. 1974.

17 Patrick Heron, 'The Americans in the Tate Gallery,' *Arts*, March 1956.

18 Alan Bowness used the phrase as the title for his article appeared in *Studio International*, July 1967.

19 Norbert Lynton, 'British painting and American influence,' *Cambridge Opinion*, No. 37, 1963.

20 John Russell, 'London/NYC: the two-way traffic,' *Art in America*, April 1965.

21 At one point Heron presumed that narrow gap in Newman's painting is the visual residue of an image of the sky seen through the skyscrapers in Madison Avenue where Newman then lived.

Chapter 1

THE ORIGINS OF ABSTRACTION IN BRITAIN BEFORE THE INFLUENCE OF POSTWAR USA

The bulk of abstract art in the fifties, before Abstract Expressionism's sudden intrusion, was a continuation of the practice and theories developed before the war. The legacy left by British artists and critics who endeavoured to modernise British art, to promote an abstract art practice in Britain, was still respected. The introduction to England of the early modern art, mainly Post-Impressionism, Cubism and Kandinsky, did not result in an equivalent in Britain of the abstract art in Continental Europe but a prominent formalist art theory. Such theory elaborated by Roger Fry and Clive Bell had an influence on much subsequent development in abstract art and its explanation. The second phase of development in abstract art started in the late twenties and was hailed between 1934, when Unit One was founded, and 1937 when *Circle* was published, at the brink of World War II. It was a movement with a strong international flavour. Not only were its two prominent practitioners, Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth, members of the Paris-based Abstraction Cr  ation, but also there was the presence of famous Europeans including Mondrian, Naum Gabo, Gropius and Moholy-Nagy in London. After the war, ideas expressed in articles in *Circle* were inherited by Victor Pasmore, who was in the centre of the British constructivists in London. On the other hand, as Nicholson, Hepworth and Gabo settled at St. Ives to keep away from the bombardment in London during the war, they educated some young artists there. These young St Ives artists were a strong force in the abstraction of the fifties. The short-lived movement of *Objective Abstraction*, in London in between 1933 and 1937, also enjoyed a brief revival in the mid fifties. It was only at the end of the fifties that a

new generation of abstract artists, associated with the important *Place* exhibition and the two *Situation* exhibitions (a third one was in the form of an Arts Council touring exhibition), involved in the art movement that broke conceptionally with the previous movements. They attained a superior position over the St. Ives painters and the British constructivists in the sixties.

The significant effort to introduce into Britain the latest developments in French painting started in the last decade of the nineteenth century when the Barbizon landscape painters were still the favoured French artists for the British. Before long, exhibitions of Impressionist painting were held in London galleries. In the first decade of the twentieth century Post-Impressionism and the Fauves were featured occasionally in galleries and artist organisations like The International Society and New English Art Club. It was Roger Fry's two famous Post Impressionist exhibitions, *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* and *Post-Impressionism* in 1910 and 1912 respectively, which provided the sheer number of works for inspection and resulted in a lasting interest among artists, critics and academicians. Fry deliberately used his editorial authority, as he was the founder and co-editor of *Burlington Magazine*, to introduce the Post-Impressionist painters and the terms in which they were presented to its very influential audience. Fry smoothed the way for Post-Impressionism's acceptance in England, also, by including in his introductory articles discussion of the art, such as that of Sargent, which was respected and secure.¹

The two Post-Impressionist exhibitions and their accompanying critical debates led to a crystallisation of ideas about the new art. Cézanne, from whose painting many formalist perceptions of art comes, was the focused subject of the second exhibition and drew most attention in debates aroused by the two exhibitions. It was mainly through the two significant exhibitions and Fry's critical writings, supported by Clive

Bell, the revolutionary works of Cézanne, Seurat, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Munch, Matisse, Braque, Picasso and eventually Kandinsky, became familiar to British artists and public. In the meantime Fry elaborated his formalist theory mainly from the paintings by Cézanne. In formulating his theory Fry was indebted to the aesthetic system of the German critic Meier-Graefe, one of the few critics who discussed Post-Impressionism extensively and positively and whose *History of Modern Art* English edition was published in 1908. Fry also took a good deal from Maurice Denis whose article on Cézanne he published in *Burlington* in 1910.²

Fry chiefly located his theory in the Post-Impressionist commitment to form as he stated in his article about the first exhibition in *Nation* that 'more and more regardlessly they are cutting away at the merely representative element in art to establish more and more firmly the fundamental laws of expressive form at its barest, most abstract elements.'³ Much of the theoretical ground for the acceptance of the Post-Impressionism in England was prepared by a preceeding art movement - Arts and Crafts Movement. It provided the language and principle necessary for the critics and audience to understand Fry's exhibitions and Fry fused his formalism with concepts such as limitation, bareness and purity.⁴ Spiritual interpretation of Post-Impressionism fitted in with the way in which Post-Impressionism's early supporters saw the new painting.

It was in the catalogue for the second exhibition that Fry, with the help of Clive Bell now, focused the discussion solely on form itself. This was a shift of concentration from the expression of emotion to the exact nature of that emotion and the means by which it was realised and transmitted. The work of art by the Post-Impressionists was independent of every day life and of any 'place or time, or a particular civilisation or point of view.'⁵ Their concerns here were with form itself rather than the outside world with which it associated and with canvas, the product,

rather than with the artist who produced it. Fry started in the catalogue introduction the use of concepts like 'plastic expression' or 'plastic design' and Bell used a similar set of words like 'significant form' or 'aesthetic emotion.' The validity of these new concepts was shown when Fry used them to establish the distinctions between Picasso and Cézanne whom he saw as primarily plastic artists, and Matisse whom he regarded as communicator using forms as the devices for communication.⁶

This theory laid much emphasis on a possible independent role for abstract form and it, together with the inspiration provided by abstract paintings by Kandinsky which were shown at the Allied Artists Salon at the Albert Hall in 1913, encouraged a few painters in Bloomsbury Group towards bold experimentation that led ultimately to some abstract paintings.⁷ Duncan Grant, Vanessa Bell and Fry himself started to use papier-collé in 1912 while they worked together in the Omega Workshops. They started to experiment with purely abstract shapes in 1913. Abstract paintings by them were distinguished by the fact that they were not produced in relation to any metaphysical theory which informed the abstract paintings by Kandinsky, Robert Delaunay and Malevich. Theirs are a more material-based approach to abstraction. *The Scroll or Abstract Kinetic Collage Painting with Sound* 1914 by Grant, for example, was a sensuous painting composed by pure abstract forms. It was supposed to be viewed through a rectangular aperture whilst it was slowly being unwound like a roll of film passing between the two spools of a camera to the accompaniment of music. Grant stopped exploring abstraction when he found his abstract paintings were neither interesting to his friends nor encouraged by them.⁸ The other two were in similar situations and there was only a handful of works produced by each artist.

Fry's theory was never convincingly supported by his own works nor by the artists he was associated with. Although this was true, Fry was held responsible for much of the critical language applied to the post-

Cézanne generations. Even in Fry's own time his opponents had to make a compromise as they seemed to be compelled to use his terminology. When Fry's monopolising position was challenged by the critic Hulme the latter softened his stance by using the terminology associated with Fry.⁹ Hulme had an alternative concept of modernism derived from the continental, and particularly, German ideas on aesthetics and was championing the Vorticists Jacob Epstein, Wyndham Lewis, David Bomberg, Frederick Etchells - the English branch of Futurists. While Hulme believed 'the significant new art (Vorticism) was characterised by a desire for austerity and bareness,' he claimed Vorticism was also 'a striving towards structure and away from the messiness and confusion of nature and natural things.'¹⁰ Bomberg, the one who participated in all major Vorticist activities but only loosely associated with the Vorticist manifesto, was concerned more for formal experiment than any symbolic implication of the 'machinery' on which the Vorticist imagery was based. Bomberg stated in the catalogue to his first one man show at Chenil Gallery that his objective was the 'construction of Pure Form' and he 'reject(s) everything in painting that is not Pure Form.'¹¹ Because he was not able to develop any corresponding linguistic independence, he had to make constant use of Post-Impressionist language, though his standpoint owed more to Futurism and Vorticism.

In general, Fry helped to formulate the rules for the abstraction to come in the next forty years. Fry's theory was followed in all or part by many major critics dealing with abstract art. For example, it informed Herbert Read's art criticism which was, in large measure, critical of Fry's formalist approach. Towards the end of the forties Fry's formalist criticism was revived in the hands of Patrick Heron, the Middle Generation artist and critic. The American critic Clement Greenberg, the formalist critic who had dominated the most of the fifties and the sixties, had even more to do with Fry's formalist theory.

The second phase of development of abstract art in Britain was a more fruitful one which started with a loose artists' organisation The Seven and Five Society in 1924 and reached a climax just before the Second World War. Abstract art was firmly established for the first time during this period. It had two distinct characteristics that were relevant to understanding abstract art in the fifties. One was that there was never a pure plastic art in the sense that one may get from the writings of Fry. Rather, it always mingled with a British affection for landscape. The other was its relationship with Surrealism. On the one hand Surrealism was accepted with comfort because British painting's long time association with literature provided a ready breeding-ground. Surrealist automatism, on the other hand, never attracted serious interest among British artists and theorists. There was a sharp contrast between the attitudes towards Surrealist automaticism in Britain and the United States where Surrealist automatism was a positive stimulus to all the major Abstract Expressionists.

The members of Seven and Five Society had been changing ever since its existence. After Ben Nicholson was introduced by Ivon Hitchens in 1924, the society fell gradually in favour of its abstract artist members. There were a lot of discussions about contemporary painting in Paris and Germany in the group - the works by artists such as Piet Mondrian, Jean Helion, Hans Arp, Sophie Taeuber, Alexander Calder and Alberto Giacometti were discussed and analysed. The society was biased towards abstraction when Ben Nicholson became its chairman in 1926. In 1934 a new name for the group, Seven & Five Abstract Group, was proposed and its exhibition a year later, the last one before the society stopped, consisted entirely of non-figurative works. It was the first such exhibition in Britain.

Among the members of the Seven and Five, Hitchens and Nicholson were particularly relevant to discussions of abstract art in the fifties. Both developed their respective methods to incorporate abstract form or semi-abstract form with sensuous response to the call of landscape. Hitchens was influenced by Bell's *Since Cézanne* immediately after it was published in 1922. He had also subsequent acquaintance with Fry's *Vision and Design*.¹² Hitchens soon introduced some of these ideas into his painting. His first important painting *Curved Barn* 1922, for example, was a painting all about formal experiment as indicated by the subtitle he gave later, *An Essay in Essential Form and the Dynamic Relation of One Plane to Another*. Hitchens found his future forms of painting, which he continued ever after, in 1925 when he stayed with the Nicholsons at Bankshead near Brampton in Cumberland. Hitchens produced a group of landscape paintings in which he achieved a characteristic painterly quality. Hitchens' main interest was still problems of design - the harmonies and rhythmical relationship of colours and shapes. But he had achieved in his paintings more than what he declared, because he found his unique method to distort and compress landscape with great sensitivity of mind and feeling for colour. Hitchens' painting was extraordinarily lyrical although he reduced the forms and colour to almost the essentials. His treatise of form and landscape anticipated some aspects of abstract paintings in the fifties. Even a glance at some paintings by Patrick Heron, Roger Hilton and Peter Lanyon will tell they were all aware of Hitchens.

Nicholson was under the influence of Lewis for a brief period but by the early 1920s he moved much closer to the ideas of Fry than Lewis. In Nicholson's first completely non-figurative composition, *First Abstract Painting* 1924, forms were organised by him into flat 'planes' according to principles derived from synthetic Cubism yet he invested in a freshness and clarity of colour. Nicholson had synthesised two aspects

of the previous Cubist art: on the one hand the 'transparent' quality of Braque's paintings of 1911-12, where forms and planes appear to interpenetrate in space and on the other hand, forms in Picasso's works after 1913, where hard-edged areas of flat colour are used to suggest clear divisions between one 'level' and another. Nicholson started, in paintings like *Goblet and Pears* 1924, to employ very thin and fine lines that functioned descriptively with a degree of independence. The contrast between the very thin lines and the rough surface of colour fields or areas produces beautiful results and this was explored in his future abstract works. Nicholson rose as a major abstract painter in Britain when he was absorbed by the Paris-based international abstract movement the Abstraction Création in 1926 and his exhibition of abstract paintings in the same year. The first of the kind in England, it caused rows in the art world. Imitation of what he saw from his colleagues in Paris, rather than what he had read from the theories by either Fry or Lewis, led him to complete abstraction.

In 1933 Nicholson produced his first relief painting and the second year the first white relief. What made his works different from those of his Paris colleagues were the elements that evoke a feeling equivalent to that of a natural rural atmosphere, although his paintings appeared more remote from landscape than Hitchens' were. Nicholson's use of even white over his reliefs came from an intuitive preference for, and pursuit of, an extreme clarity which was associated with quality of light and atmosphere in particular places and at particular moments; for example, the snow in Ticino and white-washed cottages in St Ives. Nicholson further explored this interactive relation between painting and landscape when he was at St. Ives to escape from Germany's bombardment of London.

Even before the Seven and Five Society ceased its activities, Nicholson was involved in founding a more ambitious artist group the Unit One. It was initiated by Paul Nash in 1933 when Surrealism became increasingly an international phenomenon. Nash, in response to the new trend, proposed the idea to his artist friends and successfully drew together artists as dissimilar as Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth (sculptors), Nicholson, John Armstrong, John Bigge, Edward Burra, Edward Wadsworth (painters), Wells Coates and Colin Lucas (architects). As the Surrealist work became more and more accessible (Miró and Ernst at Mayer Gallery and Dali had his one-man exhibition at the Lefevre Gallery) and texts about Surrealism were published in English, an attempt to synthesise Surrealist vocabulary appeared in London. British artists seemed to be ignorant of or to have neglected the excessive political overtones of André Breton and others. What interested them in Surrealism was the evocative power derived from the unpredictability and incidence of its imagery. Nash, one of the most active advocates of Surrealism in Britain, had conceded that the future of contemporary art was in a union between Surrealism and abstraction.¹³ Nash himself had done some experiments with abstraction for a short while and soon was convinced that was not his field. The union of Surrealism and abstraction in his Surrealist works was achieved by transplanting his 'objects,' which he had used briefly in his constructive paintings before, in landscape setting.

The major abstract artists were, unlike Nash, not open to compromise and believed that there was room for only one modernism. Nicholson, for example, wanted to squash Surrealism even at its outset. While the artistic persuasion of these abstract artists had decided their attitude to Surrealism, they saw it as an opposition and rival - there was in fact competition between them. For a long time the abstract artists had waited for recognition, and they did not want a new

representational approach to art to come into dominance. Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth, the two major abstract artists in the thirties, kept strictly in, and guarded carefully, their territory in reaction to the rise of Surrealism.

British Surrealists seemed to have lost the battle with the abstractionists. Apart from the fact that there was a lack of convincing surrealist works by them, it had also something to do with the most predominant critic of the time, Herbert Read. When Read came to resettle in London after his two year stay at Edinburgh he settled at Hampstead, close to most of the members of Unit One, by a generous offer from Henry Moore. On his arrival Read was caught in the controversy at once and he functioned most of the time as a go-between. Artists in both camps had, in different ways, managed to retain a close relationship with Read, realising his 'rapidly rising position as the defender of modernism in England.'¹⁴ Indeed Read began at Hampstead to fill the role of proselytiser for his artists at Hampstead just as Fry had done for Post-Impressionism twenty years or more earlier.

The formalist theory of Roger Fry, then still in the air, denied expressionistic elements in art. But Read, like T. E. Hulme whose *Speculations* he was editing in 1933, had also looked to Germany for his aesthetic because Read was truly a partisan of Northern art while recognising the importance of French art as well. While Read acknowledged the subtle painter's eye Fry brought to his criticism and his wide-ranging and deep knowledge of art history, he attacked the notions inherent in Fry's theory which was concerned too much with 'plastic values.' From Read's point of view, Fry was in danger of reducing the whole capacity of art to an apprehension of formal values. Anti-intellectual and reductive, according to Read, Fry failed to pay attention to the polemics of art of the time and he tended to retreat into the private world of his own sensibility.

Although Read's own strengths as a creative writer were in accordance with Surrealism, his stated preference was for abstraction and he remained a fervent advocate of abstraction. Read brought theoretical coherence to Unit One as a whole but he never treated the British Surrealists equally. Read's inclination to abstract art came from his ideological belief. Abstract art was the ideal art form as Read stated that revolutionary art should not concern itself with literal representations of hammers and sickles but instead follow 'the vitality and intellectual strength of new architecture,' by which he meant that practised by Gropius and the Bauhaus in Germany.¹⁵ Although Read thought Surrealism as the other revolutionary art of the time that was 'literary, subjective and actively Communist' he regarded it as merely a temporary significance. Surrealism was 'negative' and 'destructive,' and the art of 'transitional period.'¹⁶

Surrealist automatism, which André Breton had always treated as having central importance in a Surrealist attitude in art, had not much response in England.¹⁷ The English Surrealists never fully committed themselves to automatism and kept a distance from it. Read himself doubted automatism because it was against his definition of art:

Art, in the fundamentally revolutionary sense..., involves an original act of creation - the invention of an objective reality which previously had no existence.¹⁸

Automatism was in this sense anti-art. On the one hand it asked for a 'surrender' of intellectual freedom which was essential to the creation of art. The Surrealist 'projection of a symbol or image from the unconscious,' on the other, was not an act of creation but merely the transfer of 'an existing object from one sphere to another - from the mental sphere to the verbal or plastic sphere.'¹⁹

Nevertheless Read did participate in the promotion of Surrealism in Britain. He had sympathy with it perhaps because he was attracted by

an emphasis on certain intuitiveness in Surrealism. 'Intuitive' was an important concept in Read's understanding of art as a whole:

Form, though it can be analysed into intellectual terms, balance, rhythm and harmony, is really intuitive in origin; it is not in the practice of artists an intellectual product. It is rather emotion directed and defined.... Frankly I do not know how we are to judge form except by the same instinct that creates it.²⁰

Read perceived the importance of the intuition for both abstraction and Surrealism, although he realised that abstraction was more congenial to a rational approach to art. The possibility of excess in Surrealism frightened Read as he observed that Surrealism developed phases of 'revolution' as well as 'reaction,' and its short history was full of 'pitfalls and booby-traps.'²¹ Therefore he responded to it in an extremely cautious way.

It was Hepworth's and Nicholson's search for a purity in their art that made constant demands upon Read. The geometric and abstract works by Hepworth and Nicholson of this period exemplified an ambitious and idealistic persuasion among the abstractionists at Hampstead, as declared by Nicholson in 1934:

What we are searching for is the understanding and realisation of infinity - an idea which is complete, with no beginning and no end and therefore giving to all things for all time.²²

While both Surrealism and abstraction attained high profiles in the thirties but the latter was in a more advantageous position. A magazine called *Axis* emerged in 1934 and devoted to advocate abstract art in Britain, although for a limited period only. In September 1935, Nicholson's white reliefs were shown at the Lefevre Gallery which remained the most coherent one-man modernist exhibition by an English

artist before the Second World War. A month later, the Seven and Five Society, largely under influence of Nicholson, held its first all-abstract exhibition. A comprehensive abstract art exhibition, *Abstract and Concrete*, was held at Oxford in 1936 in which English abstract artists exhibited alongside with Mondrian, Moholy-Nagy, Héliou and Calder. British abstract artists were explicitly linked with Parisian artists in other ventures, for instance, in *Modern Pictures in Modern Rooms*, both British and Parisian artists were included. The triumphal situation in abstract art must have been particularly inspiring.

Furthermore, the abstractionists at Hampstead were greatly strengthened by an influx of top European abstract artists because the political situation on the Continent reached its worst between 1936-38. The first refugee architect Walter Gropius came in 1934 and he was followed by Moholy-Nagy and Naum Gabo in 1935. They all settled at Hampstead. Also Mondrian set up his studio in Parkhill Road alongside the Mall in 1938. Naum Gabo was particularly important in the transcending pre-war British abstract art as he integrated best with British artists and stayed longer.

In 1937 a few core figures were confident enough to issue their own manifesto *Circle*, a publication coinciding with the exhibition *Constructive Painting* at the London Gallery in July 1937.²³ Nicholson, Gabo and Leslie Martin organised the exhibition and edited the book. Their main concern was revealed by Martin:

.... The descriptive terms applied to this kind of work, for instance 'abstract' or 'non-representational' seemed to us to be inadequate and to remove the idea of the content. We believed that such works were positive and affirmative: they were symbols built up around the attempt to construct the work of art, in whatever material into some sense of wholeness as coherence of form. This type of art represented, as we said in our editorial, work which appeared to have a common idea and a common spirit, the constructive trend in the art our day.

The publication of *Circle* was the highlight of the thirties and was a confident expression of Britain's contribution to an international abstract art movement. Read asserted later that 'between Unit 1 in 1934 and *Circle* in 1937 the foundations were laid for the art that was to develop in England during the next twenty-five years.'²⁴

In the end Surrealism in England failed as a movement. Perhaps the British tend to remain "gentlemen" and it was possible for them to be with Surrealism for only a short time. Nash's call in 1934 for a marriage between abstraction and Surrealism hardly became reality in England. Only Henry Moore, Francis Bacon and Graham Sutherland were exceptional. They viewed the unification of Surrealism and abstraction in more general terms. Moore once stated:

The violent quarrel between the abstractionists and the surrealists seems to me quite unnecessary. All good art has contained both abstract and surrealist elements, just as it has contained both classical and romantic elements - order and surprise, intellect and imagination, conscious and unconscious. Both sides of the artist's personality must play their part.²⁵

In the United States, where there was a similar call for a union between the two 'revolutionary' art forms, a completely different hybrid resulted.

A short-lived tendency in London in the mid-thirties complements the monopoly of abstract art of Nicholson's kind. It was somewhat neglected because mainly it was, and was treated as, an isolated phenomenon. A unique exhibition *Objective Abstraction* was held at Zwemmer Gallery in March 1934, to which seven artists contributed. Three or four works by each of them were included and all works had the same title *Painting*. Nevertheless, only three out of the seven, Rodrigo Moynihan,

Geoffery Tibble and Graham Bell showed works that merit 'abstraction.'²⁶ These abstract paintings represented a particular kind of search into the unknown possibilities of pure and subjectless painting by these three during the period between early 1933 and late 1936.

Tibble, Moynihan and Bell were testing the idea that objective painting consisted simply of brush marks and the painter's commitment to them. The application of paint and brush marks in their paintings was intuitive. Tibble was a talented painter and his painting often achieved results which were pleasing to the eye. For example, in *Still Life* 1929, the objects on a table were more easily read as a 'translation' of them into an sensational arrangement of colours rather than as a representation of the specific objects. Tibble's paintings in Objective Abstraction (none exist now and one can only get a clue from a small reproduction in the catalogue for *Objective Abstraction*), were loose in composition and illusory, with freely applied transparent colours. These were reminiscent of the paintings by Turner and later, Monet.

Moynihan was the most persistent amongst them. Between 1933-1937 Moynihan went away from a still life based treatment of canvas and became in favour of the 'encrusted, all-over surfaces' in paintings like *Painting* 1935.²⁷ To complete such movement Moynihan drew elements from a variety of sources, from later Cézanne, later Monet and Turner to Chinese painting and Chinese and Japanese calligraphy.²⁸ In his abstract paintings from *Objective Abstraction* onwards until 1937, the composition was all-over; the surface of the canvas was built up by multiple layers of paint applied freely in a calligraphic manner; the all-over linear marks sometimes were overlaid with a crude greyish expanding vortex (as shown in *Objective Abstraction* 1936). Moynihan possessed great sense of painterliness and was emotionally in opposition to the then main stream abstract painting of Nicholson and Edward Wadsworth. He contrasted them with Picasso that 'even in his (Picasso's) most extravagant conceptions,

he will yet keep his forms fluid and (give) the impression that they have grown upon the canvas, and have not usurped it.'²⁹

Moynihan stopped his experiment in 1937 after he enjoyed some favourable reviews; Tibble abandoned his persuasion in *Objective Abstraction* painting even earlier, after his exhibition in his own studio at 13 Fitzroy Street in October 1936. Tibble felt increasingly isolated and accepted the general consensus among his friends that in these paintings 'there was nothing to advance to.'³⁰

There were a few explanations for the short-life of this seemingly isolated phase of prewar abstract painting. This type of painting may be ahead of its time and there was a lack of ready audience and critics. The general political situation of the time - the imminence of war forced upon all left-wing intellectuals from 1937 onwards - was also an element that made it intolerable to many people. But the significant factor was that there was no context for it:

I think the weakness, and why the style was rather short-lived, was that we throttled it by using such a restricted tonality and one kind of stroke and almost one size of canvas.... The doubts increased, all the time I felt cut off from something some meaning that ought to lie some where, and, although the theoretical basis seems right, one did have that cut-off feeling, and particularly at the time of the surrealist exhibition in 1936.³¹

In the catalogue to *Objective Abstraction* a set of questions and the answers to each of them by the exhibitors was printed. The questions reflect a general curiosity about the unusual type of painting and how they were painted. To answer the question 'what are you trying to express in your painting?' Bell stated that it was a visual presentation of a psychological state. Tibble thought of no words but the painting itself to answer.³² With regard to the question about the painting process, all the three claimed they were guided by intuition and the happenings on

canvases. Once the painting started, Bell explained, the additional marks were 'called into being' by what was already on the surface of the canvas and for Moynihan the painting process was an intimate 'evolution bound up with the canvas and the medium.'³³ The statements made by them invite the assumption that *Objective Abstraction* anticipated Abstract Expressionism and abstract painting in the fifties at large, and even a regret that it had not developed as a strong movement like Abstract Expressionism.³⁴

The outbreak of the Second World War changed the pace of development of the hailed abstraction and redistributed its members geographically. St Ives became, accidentally, one of the breeding-sites for the next generation of abstractionists. St Ives, a small fishing town in Cornwall, had been an artist's colony for more than a century and was once toured by Turner, Whistler and Sickert, to name but a few. In the thirties St Ives artists were roughly divided into two different categories. The majority of them worked in the manner of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism and the few, although they were much more admired, produced paintings with a merit of primitiveness and naiveté. The Nicholsons, joined later by Gabo settled at St Ives in 1938 to flee from the bombardment in London. Soon after, they and their increasing number of followers gained an advantageous position against the traditionalists in the artist's community.

Nicholson and Hepworth's art did not go much further during the long war years, rather, they experienced setbacks at times. Their extreme stance in abstract art was compromised under the pressure of the harder life, the difficulties in getting materials and so on. What may have compensated for it was their exploration of the natural, beautiful and, somewhat primitive surroundings of St Ives. On his arrival at St Ives Nicholson started immediately to work, to make white reliefs, continuing what he had been doing in London. Before long, he was drawn into the

landscape and made many trips around St Ives. Nicholson seemed to be compelled to incorporate the landscape into his painting. He immediately discovered that the landscape elements could be used to set up formal interrelationships of colour, mass, texture and linear rhythms.

Hepworth experienced almost the same as Nicholson did. Many of Hepworth's pieces produced during the time were inspired by the 'pagan landscape' between St Ives and Land's End - particularly the rugged coast-line with its towering cliff and curving inlets and the Neolithic standing stones which she discovered on the surrounding moors. Hepworth also developed some important devices at St Ives. She began to paint the interiors of her hollowed-out forms a delicate duck-egg or pale green to represent the sea. She also further exploited the strings, which she first used in 1938 in response to Gabo's and Moore's use of them. In St Ives the strings were an important device utilised to reflect the feeling of tension between herself, the wind and the sea.

Nicholson and Hepworth, as well as Gabo, gradually became influential to the younger painters at St Ives. Of course, they had brought with them their vantage points of view as the renowned figures in the still awesome domain of abstract art. They also brought their professionalism and attitude of working to St Ives, which were strong inspiration to many young artists. The most valuable lesson they offered was perhaps the tactics of incorporating landscape with abstract form which were completely new and stimulating. This concern with locale and using abstract or semi-abstract forms in an evocative way became the main feature of the paintings by many of the young artists the Nicholsons influenced there. A few of them were the major artists in the fifties abstract art.

Further investigation in abstraction in London started immediately after the war. Camberwell School of Art, under the principal of William

Johnstone between 1938 and 1946, had the most credence in the early days. When Johnstone reorganised the staff in 1945, after the wartime disruption and after the school's relocation, he brought together Victor Pasmore, Kenneth Martin, among other former Euston Road School teachers, and a number of New-Romanticists. The thriving of the renewed interests in abstraction was attributed to Johnstone's effort to introduce an interdisciplinary approach at the School. Following Johnstone's change of principalship from Camberwell to the Central School of Art (1947-1960) where Pasmore transferred to (1949-53), and Hervey Adams (1949-55) Alan Davie (from 1953) Richard Hamilton (1952-3) Nigel Henderson (1951-4) joined as new members of staff, this interdisciplinary approach was transferred to the Central School, too. The experimental teaching at the School was one of the sources of the 'developing process teaching' flourishing in many art schools in the country in the fifties.

Pasmore played an important role in the whole process. Pasmore was one of the exhibitors of *Objective Abstraction* at the Zwemmer Gallery, although at the time he exhibited only the freely-handled and Fauve-influenced, nevertheless representative pictures that were far from abstraction. Pasmore destroyed his experimental works in abstraction he did at the time of the exhibition and in 1936 he took Sickert, Degas and late Manet as his models. In 1937 he resigned from his job as a bank clerk and became involved with Euston Road School. In the forties Pasmore studied the writings by Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Kandinsky, Mondrian, Arp. In a letter to Bruce Laughton, Pasmore indicated that reading the letters of Cézanne revealed to him 'a new dimension to visual representation by uniting objective and subjective factors in a dialectical relationship.'³⁵ Pasmore's series of paintings based on river and park scenes, for example, *Gardens of Hammersmith No. 1947-49* and *The Park* 1948, were his effort to put this realisation into practice. Soon after, he found, although these paintings were well received as lyrical

and straightforward impressionist studies, the ambiguity in this approach led to a state of confusion and indeterminacy. He reckoned that the representational lines of Post-Impressionism, Cubism, Matisse could only lead to a breakdown of the rational development of modern art - abstract art.³⁶ The period of 1948-9 was the crucial time in Pasmore's stylistic development when he was decisively influenced by Klee's *Sun and Town* shown in the ICA's *Forty Years of Modern Art* in 1948:

At an exhibition in London I discovered a painting by Paul Klee made up only of coloured squares. I decide straight away that this was the objective point from which I could start again.³⁷

His first abstract paintings under the Klee influence were pictures with square and triangular shapes such as *Square Motif* 1948 and *Abstract in Indian Red, Pink, Olive and Crimson* 1949. At the same time he developed the spiral motif which had origins in his Hammersmith garden pictures. In his slightly later paintings he employed both geometric shapes and spirals, for example, in *The Eclipse* 1950. The basic techniques in the spiral paintings involved improvisation which seemed contradictory to his interest in a rational approach to painting. Before long Pasmore abandoned it in favour of collage with which he also started in 1948. It was the collage painting that led to his full commitment to constructivist reliefs.

Pasmore's paintings, the square paintings and the spiral motif paintings, between 1948 and 1951 were not as radical as his theory or probably his teaching, yet, they had decisive influences on the few young artists who were following him at the time. Terry Frost, for example, produced his first abstract painting under the influence of Pasmore's square paintings. Pasmore's spiral motif was also an interest in Frost's painting in early 1950.

Until the early 1950s abstract artists, or those inclined to abstract art, worked in two roughly defined styles. On the one hand, there were the so-called Middle Generation artists incorporating a wide spectrum of style - at one end there was Alan Davie's gestural abstraction and at the other Terry Frost's synthesis of constructivist philosophy and a sensuous response to landscape. On the other hand, the London abstract artists, Pasmore after 1952, Mary Martin and Kenneth Martin, were confined to their constructivist approaches. Both groups of artists were continuing with, or closely connected with pre-war abstract art. It was a relatively quiet time, but British abstract art was developing simultaneously with Neo-Romanticism, realism and the individual giants, Henry Moore and Francis Bacon. There was no radical manifesto and the competition between artist groups was not bitter compared with the situation in the mid thirties and the one after 1956 when the Independent Group posed an aggressive challenge in the art scene.

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 - 4 Roger Fry, 'The Post-Impressionists,' *Nation*, 3 December 1910.
 - 5 Roger Fry, Catalogue for the exhibition The Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition, London, Grafton Gallery, 1912, p. 23.
 - 6 Ibid, pp. 26-9.
 - 7 After he saw the paintings by Kandinsky in the exhibition, Fry was convinced of the possibility of an abstract form, 'They are pure visual music; but cannot any longer doubt the possibility of emotional expression by such abstract visual signs.' Roger Fry, *Nation*, 2 August, 1913.
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Chapter 2

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM AND ITS CRITICAL DISCOURSE IN THE 1950s

At the same time as the two trends of the immediate post-war abstract art, discussed in the previous chapter, became more and more distinctive from each other and from the abstraction of the thirties, a new kind of abstract art on the other side of the Atlantic reached maturity. Within a few years it became overwhelmingly influential in Europe. Abstract Expressionism was presented and to a certain extent was accepted, too, as the cutting-edge of advanced art in the West, for perhaps it synthesised the two most demanding practices of contemporary art - Surrealism and abstraction. The mainstream abstract art in England in the approximate ten years between 1955 and 1965 was associated with Abstract Expressionism and its successor Post-Painterly Abstraction.

It is not my intention in this chapter to offer a complete description of the development of Abstract Expressionism in the USA, rather to concentrate upon some facts and elements during its development and its critical discourse that in various ways affected the understanding of Abstract Expressionism by the British and that help distinguish the characters of American and British abstract art in the period in question.

First of all, there is a need to emphasise the origin of Abstract Expressionism, especially its close connection with social realism and Surrealism, both having apparent inclination towards politics. Abstract Expressionism did not grow out of its immediate predecessors in abstract art - the pre-war geometric abstract art which had practitioners in America. Most of the Abstract Expressionists followed a pattern of development - at first figurative with strong political orientation, then

semi-Cubist, then Surrealist automatist and at last complete abstractionist (although a few of its major members never completely shed representational elements).

For some reason Abstract Expressionist painting was in general treated in Britain as just abstract painting, nothing more than that. In the British context the political implication in Abstract Expressionist painting, associated with social realism and Surrealism, was cast off. Therefore Abstract Expressionism was influential to certain groups of post-war British artists - the Middle Generation painters, most of whom worked at the time as quasi abstract and figurative/landscape artists and young art students. Apparently it was not attractive to artist groups with a strong conviction to ideology, for example, the constructivists and the Neo-Romanticists nor the realists.

Abstract Expressionism was so perceived for many reasons. As already mentioned in the introduction there was an indifference to politics and ideology among British artists. They tended to see what they wanted to see in Abstract Expressionist paintings and they neglected the rest. The fact that the majority of Abstract Expressionist paintings exhibited in London in the very early stages were in mature styles may have also accounted for this perception, as the mature works appeared to cast off the traces of their origins.

The situation had most to do with the critical discourse of Abstract Expressionism in the United States itself. For various reasons a shedding of Abstract Expressionism's connections with social realism and Surrealism elements happened as soon as Abstract Expressionism had been recognised as an American school and throughout the period of transition from the first generation Abstract Expressionists to the second generation. The close relationship between Abstract Expressionism and Surrealism, especially Surrealist automatism has scarcely been taken up by the campaigners of British abstract art and reporters of Abstract

Expressionism, although Herbert Read, who had based his understanding of Abstract Expressionism on that kinship, was an exception. This may be seen as an example that shows the profound British dislike of the idea of Surrealist automatism. Surrealism and Surrealist automatism were not new to British artists. It was mentioned in Chapter 1 that in the thirties British artists and critics had never been truly sympathetic to Surrealist automatism. As a result Surrealist automatism never establish itself in England. Nor did its existence in Britain bring out a hybrid with abstract art as it did in the United States. The general condition for their rejection of Surrealist automatism had not changed in the fifties. The older generation abstract artists like Ben Nicholson, who consistently opposed Surrealism in the thirties, were still commanding figures in the early fifties. Patrick Heron, an activist in the late forties and most of the fifties, was much under Roger Fry's influence and engaged himself in a formalist programme of criticism.

The American critics and champions of Abstract Expressionism Greenberg and Rosenberg - the latter was joined by Thomas B. Hess - had provided the bulk of the information about the new American abstract art in the early fifties. The three each took roles that were prevailing to the interested British. Throughout the fifties and early sixties Greenberg and Rosenberg were competing and the outcome was Greenberg's unexpected power in influencing both artists and the public. The dialectic criticism from Greenberg was increasingly influential in Britain in the late fifties and early sixties.

Such a tendency to pursue and treat art as pure aesthetic subject was predominant in both America and Britain until the mid-sixties. Greenberg's formalist theory, not any one else's, had prominent influences on the outcome of abstract art after Abstract Expressionism. With Greenberg's support Newman, Rothko and Still rose to an ever higher status within the remaining Abstract Expressionists in the later fifties.

Greenberg was also championing a few young artists including Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Helen Frankenthaler and Jules Olitski who were, if one follows strictly Greenberg's theory, the orthodox successors to the key Abstract Expressionist Pollock. In the meantime, the Hard-Edge painters of New York and West Coast further also established themselves. The ideological concern of the first generation Abstract found no place in the paintings by the second generation artists, although the general social and politic situation in the late fifties and the first half of sixties was very different from that of the thirties and forties.

The British artists watched New York closely and the *New American Painting* exhibition that arrived in London in 1959 was the earliest and perhaps the strongest indicator of the changing taste in New York. Most of the British artists thereafter took Newman and the Hard-Edge painters, especially Ellsworth Kelly, as their prototypes. The young American artists most favoured by Greenberg, such as Frankenthaler, Morris, Noland and Olitski were dealt with by the British at a slightly later date by only a small section of the young abstract painters, although Noland's paintings came to England as early as those of Kelly.

While Europe was on the fringe of political turmoil even before the First World War, the United States enjoyed a steady economical development until 1929. The industrial expansion was an astonishing phenomenon and thereafter, a modern era of consumerism, mass culture and technology emerged in the United States earlier than anywhere else. There were many inventions, especially in the manufacturing technology. For instance cars, before the privilege of the very rich, began to be produced for even the mass, due to the use of mass production technique. New products like telephone and radio transformed people's daily life. When the Depression eventually came, the sharp contrast made American people feel it more bitterly.

The United States was not directly caught in the World War I and not so severely damaged as its European allies in World War II. Both the wars were dreadfully disastrous but the United States experienced one of the worst economic disasters of the century. While a conflict between nations promotes patriotism that covers up or diverts attention from home problems, an economic crisis always stirs up turbulence or political awareness among its people. Most of the later Abstract Expressionists were born between 1908 and 1915 and their generation of Americans experienced the most turbulent events of the century; they were politically sensitive and active in response to these crises in the society in which they lived. Abstract Expressionism was the art that came from these crises of the particular time, as claimed by the early American critics and maintained by Harold Rosenberg. The would-be Abstract Expressionists were caught up by the political events of their days.

The experience of the Depression itself, and subsequent events connected with it, was responsible for much of the general characteristics of Abstract Expressionism. Depression provoked a profound sense of pessimism and prompted a number of changes in social and political attitudes. An attitude critical of the capitalist system was spreading among American intelligentsia and an examination of capitalist ideology was immediately undertaken. In the meantime communism was rising as an apparently glossy alternative especially when the situation in Europe was worsening and the fears of the fascism were widely felt. The Soviet Union added to the illusion when it posed as a strong force in the anti-fascist alliance. Furthermore, the Soviet Union seized the opportunity and adopted the policy that conducted the Popular Front - a communist organisation aiming at drawing in a wide spectrum of intellectuals in America. It was at this very moment that many were

motivated to be involved with politics and revolution, the later Abstract Expressionists became seriously engaged in art.

The rest of the political dramas of the thirties reversed the course completely. There were a number events witnessed by American intellectuals that completely destroyed the credibility of the Soviet Union and, in fact, almost completely that of communism in general. First of all, Moscow's endorsement of a pact with France in 1936 surprised some American supporters of the Soviet Union. An event following - the Moscow Trials of 1936-1938 - was otherwise astonishing. The leadership of the Soviet Union seemed to have horrified not just the left wing radicals but also the intellectuals in the United States at large, by its brutal treatment of some of its own most prominent intellectuals. From this point on American intellectuals began the process of questioning the credibility of the Soviet Union and communism itself, as they did exactly the same to capitalism in the wake of Depression. As a result not only was Stalin but also the entire Soviet system found guilty and a link between communism and fascism was established.¹ Further outrages of the Soviet Union were observed when Stalin signed the Nazi-Russia pact in 1939 and when the Soviet Union subsequently invaded Finland in the winter of 1939-40. As a natural response to this situation, the artistic left almost completely disengaged itself from communist ideology.

A majority of the artists who were later associated with Abstract Expressionism had as much faith in radical politics as many of their contemporary intellectuals. After they were humiliated by those later events most of them became apolitical and thereafter American art went into a new era, as Greenberg observed and remarked:

Some day it will have to be told how anti-Stalinism which started out more or less as Trotskyism turned into art for art's sake, and thereby cleared the way, heroically, for what was to come.²

The artists in question were literally exercising a strategic retreat from their previous radical stance. Previously, they had been using realistic and sometimes propagandistic themes of revolution and the working class and they were enslaved by their belief in radical politics and their employment in the socialist-dominated WPA. Now they retired from their ambition in playing roles as that of Thomas Hart Benton or the Mexican Siqueiros and turned to subject-matter that was much milder in political terms. Thus they found the use of primitive art, epics and archaic myths of different times and cultures, the tenors of which were general and ambiguous, while capable of revealing deep and profound human concerns.

This political retreat was accompanied by an artistic advance. Suddenly modern art, which had been introduced to the United States for some years previously, was found to be relevant. With few exceptions (Barnett Newman and Robert Motherwell), Abstract Expressionists started their artistic career in a rather traditional manner without regard to European Modern art and their artistically more sophisticated modern contemporaries. It was in the ten years between 1930 and 1940, the majority of the would-be Abstract Expressionists were transformed from regionalists, followers of Mexican mural painting, realists to American modernist.³

It was important that they had immediate access to the newest developments in art in Europe. Since 1913, European modern art had been introduced to the United States in American style large exhibitions such as the *Armory Show* of 1913. America also built up its own magnificent collections of art, including modern art. The establishment of the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1929 was a significant event. The museum, under the directorship of Alfred Barr, launched a series of important modern art exhibitions that helped American artists to gain a systematic knowledge of the developments of modern art in Europe. The programmes on

offer in MoMA was augmented by some other resources in the city, such as the Museum of Non-Objective Art, which opened in 1939 and brought into prominence an important and somewhat neglected modernist tradition represented by Kandinsky. It is worth mentioning that Pollock, who worked as custodian at the museum and Gorky, who was a frequent visitor to the museum, were deeply affected by their encounter with Kandinsky. Furthermore, because of the war, many European private collections of modern art were transferred to the United States for safety. Compared with Europe, where cultural life was not normal, New York had more modern art accessible to the public. Without being in Europe personally, artists in New York could readily see works by Cézanne, Picasso, Seurat, Braque, Léger, Kandinsky, Klee, Dufy, Modigliani and de Chirico, almost the whole range of the European modern masters.

It is well known that Hans Hofmann's school in New York opened in 1936, had done a good deal to incite interests in matters concerning forms of painting and in updating American artists' knowledge about current European modernist painting.⁴ Attending his school was important experience for many of the later Abstract Expressionists.

But the would-be Abstract Expressionists were never converted to modernists who limited their interest in painting to only formal matters. On the one hand they felt obliged to distance themselves from politically orientated realistic and allegorical paintings of the thirties, because they feared a repetition of their experience of being ridiculed at the end of that decade.⁵ On the other hand, their unique experience of social and politic traumas since the Depression compelled them to the kind of art that had profound political and ethical concerns and that had the capacity of transcending pictorial elements into the expression of the most intensive feeling. It was a dilemma for the would-be Abstract Expressionists that they were inclined to inject their painting with

ethical messages while they were also predestined to choose the means that could make it as concealed as possible.

The aspects of modernist art which interested them revealed their preferences. The MoMA held a Picasso retrospective in 1939 and the reaction to a certain type of Picasso's works by American artists indicated what were they looking for at the time. The exhibition covered all phases of Picasso's development but it was his surrealist works that won affection from, for example, William Baziot. Baziot later described his intense response to Picasso's Surrealist themes:

Well, I looked at Picasso until I could smell his armpits and the cigarette smoke on his breath. Finally, in front of one picture - a bone figure on a beach - I got it. I saw that the figure was not his real subject, The plasticity wasn't either - although the plasticity was great. No. Picasso had uncovered a feverishness in himself and is painting it - a feverishness of death and beauty.⁶

Picasso's *Guernica* was exhibited at Valentine Dudensing Gallery in New York in January 1939. *Guernica* was his most politically oriented work until then and it was the piece of work that convinced the would-be Abstract Expressionists how it was possible to reconcile the two seemingly irreconcilables:

The brilliant fusion of ethical and aesthetic principles served to free New York School painters from two prevailing assumptions: that to be 'modern' meant to be abstract, and that to use subject was counter to the modern impulse.⁷

It was largely his seeing *Guernica* that motivated Pollock during the crucial years of his development in 1939 and 1940. Pollock had previously encountered works by Picasso. As early as in 1922, in Orland, California he saw reproductions of Picasso sketches in the copies of the

Dial that Charles Pollock, his brother, sent to him. When he was enrolled in the Art Students League between 1930 and 1932 Picasso used to be the focus of intense controversy among artists there. Nonetheless it was not until his acquaintance with *Guernica* that Picasso overwhelmed him. Jackson was fascinated with the picture and visited the picture many times and made numerous drawings from it. In the drawings he experimented with Picasso's method in transforming images and compositions.⁸

As early as 1936, the exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, brought to the Americans the European Surrealism that was so far the most sophisticated and competent in reflecting contemporary concerns. Surrealism made a real impact only at the end of the thirties when many of the Surrealists themselves fled to New York. The would-be Abstract Expressionists showed, almost immediately, an admiration for and a sympathy with Surrealism. Surrealism was an attraction to them for its provocative visual statements with overt ethic and political ingredients.

Surrealist painters apparently were obsessed with psychoanalytical theories. Automatism was a key Surrealist technique derived from psychoanalytical theories. André Masson introduced free association into drawing in order to generate forms and then entangle them in swirling veil of line; Joan Miró began his paintings by allowing his brush to wander irregularly over the canvas and then based his finished work on these automatic ideas. It was obviously enlightening at a time when most of Abstract Expressionists had just retreated from a realistic mode of painting, via Cubism, reaching a point that allowed them to paint in a much freer manner. Surrealist paintings arrived just in time to provide a convenient reference point for the Americans to continue the process to free their painting.

The outcome might have been different if the youngest Surrealist exile Sebastian Matta Echaurren had not been in New York and had not

attempted, although in vain, to found a sub-Surrealist group. Matta's manoeuvre to form a submovement within Surrealism was prompted by his interest in exploring further with automatism. In his few sessions with Motherwell, Bazziotes, Pollock and some others, Matta introduced to them automatist ideas and later these American artists communicated these ideas to other Americans not in direct contact with Surrealists. Through them Matta popularised automatic methods among the young American painters. The fact that the three artists - Motherwell, Bazziotes and Pollock were the earliest to be exposed to the public in Art of This Century Gallery mainly for their connection with the Surrealist circle, may also have encouraged others to follow.

The would-be Abstract Expressionists explored the possibilities provided by automatism for some time, with the probable exceptions of Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning who had a close relationship with other Surrealists and remained working in a more controlled manner. Both Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, for instance, went through a period of experiment with automatism. Rothko made a considerable number of automatist drawings; they were made of large brush strokes and were in large format, such as *Untitled* 1944-45. They seemed to have prepared his transitional works of 1947-48. Newman explored the possibilities of automatism in both his writing and drawing. He was surprised with the results in his drawings like *The Blessing* 1944 and *The Song of Orpheus* 1945 and delighted that, '...with an automatic move, you could create a world.'⁹

European Surrealists preferred a highly managed and often excessively detailed pictorial vision as the realisation of their unconscious, as exemplified by the paintings and drawings by Max Ernst and Masson. Americans used the technique differently and found the process of painting itself fruitful. They were never wholly comfortable with the uninhibited exploitation of the unconscious as emphasised by

Freud and it was Jung's interpretation of what he called the visionary mode (as opposed to the psychological mode) that seemed to matter.¹⁰ They preferred to obtain, through working spontaneously, a basis for something more purposeful. The results achieved from simultaneously working would be, for them, more appropriate to painting as painting, not the symbols for psychological analysis. Rothko once claimed that 'None of the American artists accepted the symbolism of the Surrealists.'¹¹

It was through the investigation of Surrealist automatism that these American painters were able to eliminate representational elements in their paintings, whilst they further freed their handling of painting. By now they were able to disorganise pictorial structure; flatten the pictorial planes; isolate certain parts of an organ from each other and fragment the bulk of the objects. In most cases this process eventually reduced their canvases to a void, though the kind and degree were various. What remained was to increase the size of canvases to an extraordinary scale. Within the few years from 1944 to 1948 all the formal characteristics of Abstract Expressionism painting were almost there.

Abstract Expressionists arrived at abstraction in a way that was fundamentally different from that of the mainstream European abstract art which had, as it is known, its off-spring in the United States. Abstract Expressionist paintings should not be read in the usual way. Rothko's statement is representative of all the Abstract Expressionists:

I have never had an interest in Mondrian. I painted in New York many years while the abstract artists (the American Abstract Artists group) were working. Abstract art never interested me;¹²

Abstract Expressionists were still obsessed with the idea that painting must have something more than form itself, although each individual artists may have preferred different content in painting.

Rothko aimed in his painting to express basic human emotions, tragedy, ecstasy, doom and ultimately poignancy while in the case of Newman it was man's 'new knowledge,' that made the painting meaningful:

If previous abstractions paralleled the scientific and objective preoccupation of our times, ours are finding a pictorial equivalent for man's new knowledge and consciousness of his more complex inner self.¹³

Man's new knowledge was the knowledge that explained or attempted to explain the events that Newman's generation had experienced - the First World War, the Depression, fascism, War again, the Holocaust and the atomic bomb. While most Abstract Expressionists were in their transitional period, new ideas about human nature, its full dimensions revealed by those traumatic events, were discussed intensively in terms of psychology, anthropology and philosophy. As it was mobilised at all cultural levels, Abstract Expressionist painting was the visual revelation of such awareness or knowingness. Newman stated once:

If it were possible to define the sense of this new movement, one might say that it was an attempt to achieve feeling through intellectual content. The new pictures are therefore philosophic.¹⁴

It should be emphasised that the existential philosophy was rapidly gaining ground in America immediately after war, as it was in Europe. This fact may explain the insistence which Motherwell and de Kooning later placed on ethical decisions inherent in the act of painting. The tenor of Abstract Expressionist thought was also inclined toward existentialism in its concern for the alienation of the individual from the greater mass of humanity.

Leading members of Abstract Expressionism came to the notice of critics as American Surrealists initially. It was in a crucial year about 1944-45 Abstract Expressionists became, one after another, the subject of exhibitions and publications. Critics and dealers were occupied sorting out and label productions circulating in the art world - it was a process marked by stumbling, grouping, confusion, and contradiction. Abstract Expressionists were connected with Surrealism by them on all occasions. In December 1944 Maude Riley proposed in the *Digest* that Pollock and Rothko might be starting a new third party, between abstraction and Surrealism.¹⁵ A few weeks later, Robert Coates in the *New Yorker* identified a new tendency distinguished by its synthesis of aspects of abstraction, Surrealism and Expressionism.¹⁶ James Johnson Sweeney singled out a trend toward 'imaginative expressionism' in *Partisan Review* that included Arshile Gorky, Morris Graves, Matta and Pollock.¹⁷ In a June 1945 exhibition *A Problem for Critics* Howard Potzel assembled works by thirty-five artists including William Baziotes, de Kooning, Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, Motherwell, Pollock, Rothko and Bradley Tomlin along with the European Surrealists Miró, Masson and Matta. The grounds for selection were that these artists combined interests in abstraction and romanticism/symbolism and they belonged to a miscellaneous hybrid modernist category.

Back in 1943, Samuel Kootz, the author of the book *New Frontiers in American Painting*, which surveying the then state of the art, simply overlooked the trend represented by Abstract Expressionists. Kootz was still viewing American art from a very general, abstract, and dated position.¹⁸ Two years later Sidney Janis included Abstract Expressionists in his survey of American contemporary art and he dealt with Baziotes, Tobey, Rothko, Gottlieb, Motherwell, as parts of the subject of surrealism in New York.¹⁹ He placed them in the vein of Surrealism when he then compared Hofmann and Pollock:

(Hofmann) is both abstract and expressionist: painted with such unpremeditated verse as to resemble the automatist method of Surrealism. Hofmann and Pollock paint with similar technique - yet they do not appear in the same category here, the line of demarcation being due to the difference of degree rather than of kind.²⁰

After the major Abstract Expressionists established themselves better and became increasingly independent of Surrealists, they were treated independently as a new school of American painting. Surrealism was deliberately abandoned in the interpretation literature by major critics in the fifties.

As the early criticism was primarily circulated in the United States and these were not widely available in Britain and, until now, Abstract Expressionists were important to only a small circle of avant grade artists and critics, they were non-existent as far as British artists and critics were concerned. It was the later criticism and the mature styles the Abstract Expressionists had achieved between 1946 and 1948 that disguised, to a large degree, this Surrealism connection. The situation affected the subsequent reception of Abstract Expressionism in Europe and Britain. Surrealist rhetoric was rarely applied to Abstract Expressionism in Britain.

In the early fifties Harold Rosenberg, Hess, and Greenberg retained their leadership as spokesmen for the new movement.²¹ These three critics were responsible for large amount of what was written by British writers. Max Kozloff once said, 'What we feel about visual works of art is in great measure conditioned by what has already been said about them.'²² It was particularly true in the case of Abstract Expressionist painting, as an expanding amount of literary information about the works was much more easily accessible than the works themselves.

Rosenberg was the first critic of Abstract Expressionism to become influential in Britain. An admirer and intimate friend of many Abstract Expressionists, Rosenberg himself was in the movement at all stages - he was an activist in WPA, a comrade poet in the Surrealist circle and one of the co-editors of *Possibilities*, the manifesto publication of the movement of which he and Motherwell managed only a single issue. Rosenberg was a critic who was an insider. His style of criticism was metaphoric in character and his critical concern was with 'the character and context of the creative act' rather than 'its resulting pictorial form.'²³

Rosenberg came to public notice after his famous article 'American Action Painters' was published in 1952. In this important article his critical approach was to separate the new tendency from all previous phases of the modern art. Abstract Expressionists were singled out by a new method. What these painters have in common, according to Rosenberg, lay in what they think, and not in what they do or act, as revealed in a passage from the article:

With traditional esthetic references discarded as irrelevant, what gives the canvas its meaning is not psychological data, but 'role,' the way the artist organises his emotional and intellectual energy as if he were in a living situation.²⁴

Rosenberg succeeded in drawing attention to a new conception of the creative activity of painting that is, at a certain moment 'the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act....'²⁵ Largely by this new conception, Abstract Expressionist painting had 'broken down every distinction between art and life.'²⁶ Rosenberg claimed that the new art prevailed ahead of any other conception of painting. Rosenberg's idea appeared subversive to the

conception of painting as a pictorial art, much to the fears of Greenberg.

The 1952 article was an extreme one in which Rosenberg rarely talked of any particular artist or work of art. He insisted that Abstract Expressionism was the production of a society that was in deep crisis. It was brought into being also by the crisis of aesthetics that was apparently out of date. The achievement of 'Action Painting,' to use his own term, was that it tackled with the crisis with creative force and more importantly, it successfully transferred the crisis into the artist's self. Although 'Action Painting' was devoid of radical subject matter - except for occasional echoes in the titles of painting such as Motherwell's *Elegy to the Spanish War* series - it never doubted the radicalism of its intentions.²⁷ Rosenberg's definition of the new art seemed to have made all formal analysis irrelevant. It was powerful in distinguishing Abstract Expressionism from all the surviving forms of art, albeit at the same time it somewhat disqualified itself.

Willem de Kooning remains his favourite artist and it can be said much of his theory was drawn from de Kooning's practice as painter. Rosenberg explained that, de Kooning's *Woman I* was 'a product of an irresolvable contradiction in the process that brought her into being' and it was seized only through the actions of the brush that 'take place simultaneously in the psyche of the artist and on the canvas.'²⁸ The endorsement Rosenberg gave to de Kooning was instrumental to the whole theory of 'Action Painting.'

Newman was another of his favourite artists but also a difficult one in terms of justifying his Action Painting theory. Rosenberg avoided discussing him in terms of 'Action Painting,' instead he concentrated on making distinctions between Newman's painting and geometric abstract painting. Newman's large, flat shape was neither the 'imitation of objects' nor 'mathematical organisation' of lines, shapes and colours.

Rosenberg defined an abstract painting by Newman as 'a living thing, a vehicle for an abstract thought-complex, a carrier of own-some feelings.'²⁹ These living things 'can not be produced by external calculation.'³⁰ The formal characters of these 'living rectangles,' unruffled surfaces, focus-less and raw colours, serve no aesthetic purpose but to compel the spectator psychologically.

Rosenberg seemed to have been easily accepted at home and Europe in the early fifties. Greenberg's protest that, Rosenberg's theory satisfied the European psyche of discrimination against the merit of Americans in pictorial art and therefore it was accepted by the Europeans, may have some substance. Greenberg also blamed the British critic Alloway for blindly accepting Rosenberg's argument and spreading Rosenberg's idea in Europe and also transferring it back to the United States subsequently. In reality Rosenberg's theory served well the need when one, standing in front of Abstract Expressionist paintings, had no any convincing alternative explanation to his experience of the paintings. In addition Rosenberg's terminology such as action, energy, gesture, had an obvious derivation from existentialist terminology that grew in Europe and was already popular there in the early fifties. These terms also had the same linguistic power one may get from slogans.

The other major critic of Abstract Expressionism Clement Greenberg also maintained an intimate relationship with some Abstract Expressionists. His friendship with a few key future Abstract Expressionists started with Lee Krasner, later Pollock's wife, who was present at Hofmann's lectures and classes as was Greenberg. Greenberg became acquainted with Pollock soon after Krasner herself had just got to know him when they were both recently included in the exhibition *French and American Painters* at McMillen Gallery in 1942. Greenberg started to write on Pollock in 1944 and on William Baziotes and Robert Motherwell

slightly later, well before these artists had been accepted at large. In the late forties the subjects of Greenberg's writing extended to include Arshile Gorky.

Greenberg's writing, composed of exhibition reviews, essays and championing articles, was journalistic and serves the occasions it was designed for. He was able to propose a systematic account of modern art (actually a fraction of it), in about the ten years from 1955 to 1965. Throughout the process of establishing such a system Greenberg was under two major influences. On the one hand, when Greenberg started art criticism he had Hans Hofmann as his mentor who taught him what Cubism had contributed to the revolution or evolution of painting. Hofmann's teaching not only gave him sense of history of style but also the tools for analysing painting in formal terms.

On the other hand, the thirties was a decade when communism had a prevailing role in political and cultural life in the United States. Greenberg's affinity with Marxism started there, although he soon converted to Trotsky Marxism which was prevailing in the late thirties and the early forties. Greenberg's early writings showed a commitment to a Marxist analysis of capitalist society. *Avant-garde and Kitsch*, for example, was one of his early pieces of writing after he accommodated his stance to Trotsky Marxism. It contained a vigorous argument about the relations between art, culture, Fascism and the prospects for socialist revolution in Europe and the USA in the mid-decade of the twentieth century.³¹ Greenberg's concern in the essay was not just art, but culture. The more valuable erudition from his involvement with Marxism was, however, an historical sense and an evolutionary concept of history. Later this historical sense, embedded in his critical system was enhanced as he drew upon the ideas of Kant and Wölfflin.³²

Although Greenberg was the earliest and most persistent champion of his selection of Abstract Expressionists, his systematic account of

modern art was elaborated in the fifties. The publication of Rosenberg's 'American Action Painters' in 1952 was perhaps the most important single external factor to push Greenberg to this formal approach. Since then they both were on the track of refining their positions in mutual opposition and each became more fixed in his own theories. Meanwhile the political and cultural life in America in the context of McCarthyism and Cold War politics was oppressive. Greenberg's turning away from a social critique toward a 'specialisation' in art criticism may also be seen as actually a product of such pressures. Greenberg's writing also became straight forward 'art criticism' concerned with 'art,' no longer with 'culture' or 'society.' Modernist criticism elaborated by Greenberg and his adherents in the 1950s and 1960s became an increasingly appropriated institutionalised and official practice.³³

Greenberg's main obligation was to find the historical (formal) significance of American abstract art (or at least a branch of it) in the middle of the century. His hypothesis was that Abstract Expressionists were assigned the historical task to exploit the formal possibilities opened by Cubism. 'American Type Painting' of 1955 was an important attempt by Greenberg to make his case. While in 'American Action Painters' Rosenberg cut Abstract Expressionism off from rest of modernist art in Europe and America, Greenberg's tactics was to fit the Abstract Expressionists he was dealing with into the order of a pictorial evolution, to set each artist into his supposed position. For Greenberg, Gorky took lessons from Miró 'only in order to escape from Picasso while finding his own way out of Picassoid space;' ³⁴ De Kooning aimed to achieve 'a synthesis of tradition and modernism that would grant him more flexibility within the confines of the Late Cubist canon of design;' ³⁵ Adolph Gottlieb and Motherwell were the pair who stayed 'closer to Late Cubism, without quite belonging to it.' ³⁶ Pollock remains Greenberg's favourite artist. He asserted that Pollock started with late Cubism

(Greenberg specified later as Picasso's paintings, like *Girl before a Mirror* of 1932, with its ornamental patterns and heavy cursive lines) and he arrived at his all-over paintings of 1946-50 as a result of taking up what Braque and Picasso left with their Analytical Cubism phase in 1912 and 1913.

A difficulty Greenberg had to tackle was to categorise Still, Rothko and Newman whom he had not quite dealt with before. The three were referred to by him as 'the most radical of all the phenomena of "abstract expressionism"' and 'the most revolutionary move in painting since Mondrian.'³⁷ Greenberg visualised a line of formal evolution: value contrast was the basis of traditional painting and a repudiation of value contrast was initiated by Turner and Monet. Paintings by Turner and later Monet explored the effect of close-valued colours and dissolved sculptural form. The conventions of light and dark were reintroduced into the paintings by the Cubists of 1912-13, as well as into the paintings of Kandinsky, Mondrian and Malevich. The process of repudiation of value contrast, as left by Turner and later Monet, was picked up in the hands of Still, Rothko and Newman.

Newman's colour functioned more exclusively as hue, with less help from differences of value, saturation or warmth. To Greenberg, Newman's flat, 'huge and darkly burning picture' composed 'perhaps the most direct attack yet on the easel convention.'³⁸ Greenberg summarised the quality of his painting in relation to value contrast, in his introduction to Newman's one-man exhibition in 1958, as that he was exploring the 'tensions between different colours of the same light value' and such tensions 'form an almost entirely new area of interest for our tradition of painting.'³⁹ Greenberg much praised Newman for the 'fullness of content' attained through an 'execution that calls the least possible attention to itself' and his refusal to offer 'the dexterity of a hand or the ingenuity of an eye.'⁴⁰ Newman's painting posed a difficulty for both

Greenberg and Rosenberg and a touchstone for their respective theories. For Rosenberg, Newman was transcending a 'living rectangle' and for Greenberg he was simply placed to accomplish the last step in deduction of 'value contrast.'^{41 42}

There were two problems in the second half of the fifties faced by the two camps of critics of Abstract Expressionism. One was a so-called crisis of art, the mannerism in the aftermath of Abstract Expressionism and the other, Pop art. They were particularly annoying to Greenberg whose major pieces of writing in the late 1950s and early 1960s were dedicated to these questions - such as 'After Abstract Expressionism', 'How Art Writing Earned Its Bad Name', 'Modernist Painting', 'Post Painterly Abstraction'. In their search for solutions to these then crucial questions, Greenberg and Rosenberg further defined and developed their respective theories of Abstract Expressionism.

The outburst of Pop art in New York certainly threatened Greenberg's taste and critical assumption and he was naturally alienated by the representation, the use of imagery sources of 'low', commercial and popular culture. To Greenberg Pop art was not an authentic art but a 'fashion' and a 'school' which in general amounted to a new episode in the history of taste, not to an authentically new episode in the evolution of contemporary art.⁴³

Greenberg spared much more his energy on the crisis of Abstract art than the problems presented by Pop art. Pollock's painting after 1950 was no longer regarded as progressive and de Kooning, who had many followers after middle 1950s, was never particularly appealing to Greenberg. The situation Greenberg described as:

Painterly Abstraction has collapsed not because it has become dissipated in formlessness, but because in its second generation it has produced some of the most mannered, imitative, uninspired and repetitious art in our tradition.

.... If there is a crisis, it is not one of abstract art in general, but one of Painterly Abstraction in particular - and it is a crisis of form and quality, not of art or non-art.⁴⁴

Greenberg increasingly leaned towards the Newman, Rothko and Still axis; in their painting he found the way out of the crisis:

Still, Newman, and Rothko turn away from the painterliness of Abstract Expressionism as though to save the objects of painterliness - color and openness - from painterliness itself.⁴⁵

Their painting, not the mannerist gesture painting, had advanced further from what Pollock had achieved. Still often dismissed the traditional usage of light and dark design while he was still capable of making contrast between colours. His painting is composed of not shapes or 'even patches', but 'zones and areas and fields of color.'⁴⁶ The occasional reminiscent brush strokes and the torn but exact edges left by knife in Still and Newman's works were the result of a desire to show their awareness of the easy effects of spontaneity. For Greenberg, their efforts pointed to 'the only way to high pictorial art in the near future.'⁴⁷ Greenberg saw these field Abstract Expressionists as knights saving Abstract Expressionism and they 'confirm painters like Louis and Noland.'⁴⁸

Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland as well as Helen Frankenthaler and Olitski could be neatly fit into Greenberg's programme. Frankenthaler came to Greenberg's notice first as an art student in 1951. She went through a succession of influences between 1950 and 1952 that included Gorky, Miró, Kandinsky, Hofmann and eventually, Pollock. In 1952 Frankenthaler tacked a huge cotton duck (7' x 10') on the floor which was spilled and stained with diluted oil paint - a painting called *Mountain and Sea* was formulated from the process. To do so she was inspired by

Pollock's 1951 black-and-white works. It happened that Louis and Noland, both based in Washington D. C., saw the painting during their visit in New York where Louis rarely went. They were stunned by it and thereafter Louis began to form his vision of a totally optical colour space by applying a staining technique - the technique that will not involve either brush or gesture but retain the implications of the personal touch and tactility they felt in gestural painting and in Frankenthaler's *Mountain and Sea*. Later Louis perfected his style in the painting series such as *Veils* of 1954 and 1958-59. Noland reached his typical style by 1958, the best known examples of it are the *Targets* series which include *Whirl* 1960. Olitski caught up with their enthusiasm with the staining technique and applied thin paint to his bare, oversized canvases.

Actually those who had a closer association with the field Abstract Expressionists, were Ellsworth Kelly and his fellow Hard-Edge painters. They had connections with European pre-war geometric abstraction, as Kelly himself spent a long period in Paris and Josef Albers, who was teaching at Harvard University, was influential to many young American artists. Kelly started to painting in a Hard Edge fashion when he was in Paris in the early fifties. As he was constantly compared with Newman, Kelly was regarded by a larger audience, including that in Europe, as the most progressive artist after Abstract Expressionism. Greenberg's theory seemed to have allocated him more appropriately than Louis or Noland. Their paintings have more of the characteristic 'physical openness,' 'linear clarity' of design and high-keyed, even-valued colour which Greenberg distinguished as the characteristics of the Post Painterly Abstraction - a blanket name he used to address the abstraction after Abstract Expressionism.⁴⁹

Greenberg's nationalist stance against European artistic prestige, also played a role in defining his position. Greenberg was one of the Americans who proclaimed the transition of cultural supremacy from Paris

to New York, an announce largely encouraged by the emergence of Abstract Expressionism. As early as in 1949 Greenberg made the acclaim that American art produced by Gorky, Pollock and others was superior, in qualitative terms, to that being produced by their contemporaries in Europe.⁵⁰ In the early sixties Greenberg was not happy with the way Abstract Expressionism was received in Europe.

It had been one of the certitudes of the forward-looking English art person that however little the English themselves might possess the art of painting, the Americans possessed it still less; and it was another certitude that the French possessed that art supremely and absolutely....⁵¹

Greenberg felt the need to emphasise, especially after he realised Rosenberg's theory that defined Abstract Expressionism in literal terms was widely accepted in Europe, that the artists in New York were superior to their contemporaries in Paris in the strict sense that they were better painters and they made a bigger contribution to the evolution of painting as art. In this sense only, American painting should be valued. According to Greenberg, Rosenberg had reduced the new American painting to mere novelty by saying that all the achievement American artists had was they created a completely new category of art. For Greenberg, to convince the Europeans in their own terms was a much harder but worthwhile work:

Imagine the shock, then, when it transpired that the wild new stuff from the United States was being taken seriously in Paris and even exerting an influence on the newest art there. At this juncture the 'action painting' business came in opportunely to restore morale, at least for the moment.

For if, as Mr Rosenberg said, the new American painting was not actually art, then that made it still right for the English to have questioned, and to continue to question, the American capacity for pictorial art, whatever else the

Americans were capable of. The way out for most English art critics (Patrick Heron is the only exception I know) became to react to Mr Rosenberg's explanation of new American painting rather than to the painting itself.⁵²

Greenberg made the point more explicitly when he complained: '....to that extent comedians like Mr. Rosenberg, who back in 1952 greeted the beginning of the end of painting as an art.'⁵³ Greenberg allocated all the blame on Rosenberg, now his publicised enemy, for the European miscomprehension of Abstract Expressionist painting.

Greenberg's vision of the formal development of modern art was criticised relentlessly for the fact he simplified the whole history of modern art, which was reduced in his hands to 'a narrow line that only takes into account Impressionism, (Analytical) Cubism, later (Synthetic) Cubism, Abstract Expressionism Post-Painterly Abstraction.'⁵⁴ Other art movements, some very important ones like Symbolism, Futurism, Expressionism, Dada, Surrealism and Pop art, etc., were simply eliminated.⁵⁵ He was also accused by socialist art historians of removing art from the society in which it was produced. The subjectivity of Greenberg's theory was obvious but in the late fifties and sixties his didactic prose, knowledge of the history of modern art, analysis of the formal properties of art made his ideas more readable and comprehensible to critics, artists and students of art and art history. The fact that the developments in abstract art during this period seemed to go, to a large degree, in accordance with his prophecy also made his theory sound. Thus Greenberg had influenced the abstract art in the later fifties and early sixties more than any other critic.

In Britain Greenberg was influential to the same category of audience - the practitioners of art. Heron, very much critical of Greenberg in the sixties, for example, found he was communicable immediately after Greenberg visited him in London in 1955. Heron felt

that he was 'closer to painting and to the language of the purely visual' compared with other critics Heron had known.⁵⁶ Anthony Caro, who had personal relationship with Greenberg, highly appreciated the 'hit home' and 'clear eye' art criticism of his works by the latter.⁵⁷

Hess was another important figure spreading the knowledge of Abstract Expressionism in the fifties. He was the editor of *Art News* between 1950 and 1956 and had written many articles and reports for the magazine. Hess was also the author of the first book-length publication treating Abstract Expressionism as subject.⁵⁸ Although not terribly influential on later criticism, his book was written without too much concern over critical apparatus and obviously acceptable to a wider readership.

Hess' book was organised loosely around the lives of the individual artists. His approach was more traditional compared with those by either Greenberg or Rosenberg. Although the general tenor of his writing owed much to Rosenberg, there was little of the radicalism as seen in Rosenberg's influential article 'American Action Painters.' Formalism, too, found its place, as the book was partially a result of Greenberg's suggestion. Whilst Hess inclined to dismiss the notion of 'crisis' that was fiercely insisted by Rosenberg, he, unlike Greenberg who was more interested in demonstrating the historical logic or inevitability of the movement, was content to describe the possibilities inherent in European and American modern artistic cultures. The first half of the book was devoted to the movement's European parentage and Hess identified Abstract Expressionism most closely within the line of Expressionism bridging Van Gogh and Soutine. Hess associated Americans with Europeans in terms of artistic temperament. He was a rare American critic who, in the early days, gave a then seemingly disproportional

historical weight to America's own directions in abstract art during the thirties and forties.⁵⁹

Hess's more influential work for the British audience was perhaps his reports of the New York art scene in *Art News*, such as 'The New York Salon' feature he ran in *Art News*.⁶⁰ Hess's report allowed the British readers to have some degree of access to the New York art world. Some exhibition projects by the Independent Group members and young artists in London in the late fifties, were reminiscent of Hess's reports. Alloway, who was still complaining in 1962 of London's lack of artistic atmosphere and professionalism that were readily available in New York and Paris, acknowledged the value of Hess's articles in *Art News*.⁶¹ Hess's report of the New York scene should have had an effect on activities in London.

¹ Serge Guilbaut, 'New York, 1935-1941: The De-Marxization of the intelligentsia,' *How New York Stole the Idea of Modernism, Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, The University of Chicago Press, 1983.

² Clement Greenberg, 'Introduction,' *Art and Culture*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1962.

³ For example, Pollock's early kinship with the regionalist Benton. It was only in his thirties, Pollock started to set his eyes on Cubism.

⁴ For this reason, later studies on the subject tend to exclude Hofmann.

⁵ Some of its members declared their critical attitudes to capitalist society and ideology whenever it was possible as, for example, Newman and Motherwell did.

⁶ William Baziotes, quoted by Rudi Blesh in Alfred A. Knopf, ed., *Modern Art U.S.A.*, New York, 1956, pp. 268-69.

⁷ Dore Ashton, *The Abstract Expressionists & Their Precursors*, catalogue for the exhibition of *Abstract Expressionism* at the Nassau County Museum of Fine Art, 1973.

⁸ Steven Naifen and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock, An American Saga*, Barrie & Jenkins Ltd. 1990, pp. 349-350. His experiment interwove with the psychological therapy given by Dr Henderson but the drawings he produced during the two years are primarily the result of such intensive studies, and the freedom he gained from the therapy.

⁹ Quoted in Thomas Hess, *Barnett Newman*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1971, p. 43.

¹⁰ Dore Ashton, *The Life and Times of the New York School*, Adams and Dart, 1972, pp. 125-126.

¹¹ William Seitz, notes from an interview with Rothko, 25 Mar. 1953, Seitz Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.. Quoted by Anna C. Chave in *Mark Rothko: Subject in Abstraction*, Yale University Press, 1989, p. 71.

¹² Ibid., p. 25.

¹³ Barnett Newman, Letter to Edward Alden Jewell, *New York Times*, July 8, 1945.

¹⁴ Barnett Newman, 'The plasmic image,' 1945, John P. O'Neill ed., *Barnett Newman, selected writings and interviews*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1990. p. 155.

¹⁵ Maude Riley, 'Jackson Pollock,' *Art Digest*, Apr. 1945. p. 59.

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- 16 Robert, Coates, 'Assorted moderns,' *New Yorker*, 20, 1944
- 17 James Johnson Sweeney, 'Art chronicle,' *Partisan Review*, Spring 1945.
- 18 Samuel Kootz, *New Frontiers in American Painting*, Hastings House, New York, 1943.
- 19 Sidney Janis, *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America*, Renal and Hitchcock, New York, 1944.
- 20 Sidney Janis, *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America*, Renal and Hitchcock, New York, 1944, p. 50.
- 21 Stephen C. Foster, *The Critics of Abstract Expressionism*, UMI Research Press, 1980, p. 69.
- 22 Max Koozloff, 'The critical reception of Abstract Expressionism,' *Arts*, Dec. 1965.
- 23 Barbara M. Reise, 'Greenberg and the group, a retrospective view,' *Studio International*, May and June 1968, p. 254.
- 24 Harold Rosenberg, 'The American action painters,' *Art News*, Dec. 1952, pp. 22-23.
- 25 Ibid., p. 23.
- 26 Ibid., p. 23.
- 27 Harold Rosenberg, 'Action Painting: Crisis and Distortion,' *Anxious Objects*, Thames and Hudson, 1965.
- 28 Harold Rosenberg, 'De Kooning: on the borders of the act,' *Anxious Objects*, Thames and Hudson, 1965, p. 127.
- 29 Harold Rosenberg, 'Barnett Newman: the living rectangle,' *Anxious Objects*, Thames and Hudson, 1965, p. 173.
- 30 Ibid., p. 173.
- 31 Clement Greenberg, 'Avant garde and Kitsch,' *Partisan Review*, Fall 1939.
- 32 Barbara M. Reise, 'Greenberg and the group, a retrospective view,' part 2, *Studio International*, June 1968, p. 314.
- 33 Jonathan Harris, 'Abstract Expressionism and the politics of criticism,' *Modernism in Dispute*, ed. Paul Wood et. el., Yale University Press, 1993, p. 57.
- 34 Clement Greenberg, 'American-type painting,' 1955, p.
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Chapter 3

THE PRESENCE OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM IN BRITAIN

Soon after the Second World War, some American art critics had claimed that New York was taking the place of Paris, as the most dynamic centre of art where new ideas and styles were generated. While Paris had yet to recover from its days under the occupation by the Nazis, America as a nation was rising rapidly in wealth, power and influence. The American critics were inspired at first by the flux of European Surrealists in New York and soon excited by the upsurge of the new American abstract painting - Abstract Expressionism which developed fully in 1948-1950. In the short period from 1946 or 1947 to 1949 American artists and critics had dramatically improved their confidence in the new painting. In the symposium organised by *Magazine of Art* in 1949 Clement Greenberg already claimed that art produced by American artists in New York was superior to that by their Parisian contemporaries.¹ The next decade, the fifties, was a period in which American critics, museum officers and dealers, with the backing of their governments and their corporate sponsors, worked on winning recognition at home and abroad for the new painting. They concentrated their work on Europe and for obvious reasons Paris was their priority.

London, however, was in a position 'between New York and Paris.'² The phrase used for an essay title suggests London's unique position in the relationship between the art in America and Europe after the World War II. In spite of its geographical position Britain was in many ways closer to the United States than its continental neighbours, for good reasons. In addition the political and social situation in Britain immediately after the war was less desperate than that in some European countries and thus the pro-American temperament shared frankly among some

London intellectuals, certainly had no equivalent in Paris. Heron and Alloway embraced, for instance, the Abstract Expressionists in a open, enthusiastic manner, when the *Modern Art from the United States* exhibition came to London in 1956.

Sited between New York and Paris, London observed and responded to the transition of the power to influence in visual art from Paris to New York. The new American abstract art became known as an approved movement of modern art to the readers of *Horizon* in 1949 when the London periodical published Denys Sutton's report on the recent American art scene. But their knowledge of the advance in visual art in United States was perhaps limited to only a few names of the Abstract Expressionists and the works of art by the Americans were rarely accessible at that time. After 1956 the showing of Abstract Expressionism in London was intensified. The aggressive presentation of Abstract Expressionist painting coincided with an obvious decrease in the French influence that had been felt strongly by generations of British artists for at least the previous half a century. Contemporary French abstract artists featured occasionally in London's galleries whilst their American equivalents were shown much more frequently in either public or commercial galleries. The transition could also be observed in other aspects of artistic practice; for example, there was a dramatic increase in British artists' visits to the United States, in the number of their exhibitions in New York and the sheer influence of American art criticism.

When British artists escaped their wartime isolation, they initially set their eyes on Paris as usual. Some French exhibitions held in London, like the magnificent *Picasso* and *Matisse* exhibitions at the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1945, *Klee* at National Gallery in 1945 and *Braque* at the Tate Gallery in 1946, *Bonnard and His Contemporaries* at Lefevre Gallery in 1947, revealed to the British what these masters had produced during the war years. These exhibitions generated a favourable

atmosphere and these masters exerted stylistic influences on many emerging British artists. Patrick Heron, Alan Davie and William Scott, for example, were all stimulated and affected by what they saw in those exhibitions.

On the other hand the coverage of new developments from Paris was inadequate: there were only a few French exhibitions in London in which the younger generation of Parisian artists was included. An important exhibition *London Paris*, held at the Institute of Contemporary Art in March 1950, was modest in size but introduced some of the most dynamic Art Informale painters including Jean Bazaine, Hans Hartung and Raoul Ubac to British artists. Another exhibition, *L'Ecole de Paris*, at the Royal Academy in 1951 also included many younger painters in its 163 works painted between 1900 - 1950. In addition *Young Painters of L'Ecole de Paris*, an Arts Council exhibition in 1952 showed 53 paintings chosen by Frank McEwen. Few of the Parisian artists greatly impressed British artists, except for Nicolas de Staël, whose exhibition at Mathiesen Gallery in February 1952 made him a hero to many painters in London. De Staël's influence was clearly visible in William Scott's painting between 1952 and 1954, for example. Patrick Heron also rushed to purely abstract painting for a short time in 1952 as a result of seeing the paintings by de Staël.

Until the end of the fifties, British artists still felt a need to visit the capitals of their European neighbours, especially Paris, to gain artistic competence and confidence. The Middle Generation abstract painters, the mainstream abstract artists in the fifties, were the last of the British avant garde artists to seek inspiration from Paris and to measure their progress against art produced there. Changes were already obvious however; they looked more at masters of modern art - the traditions of modern art rather than their French contemporaries.

Take Scott and Heron as examples again. Before the outbreak of the war Scott had been to Paris and travelled to many places in France although most of his time was at Pont-Aven where he taught courses in painting and drawing. Scott was able to establish contacts with his French contemporaries like Tal Coat and some much older artists like Emile Bernard, but he was not involved with the contemporary scene there. When Scott returned to Pont-Aven and then to Paris in the summer of 1946, as soon as the war was over, he was attracted by traditional French paintings, like those in the exhibition *A Thousand Years of Still Life Painting* in Paris which affirmed his interests in still life. He had barely paid attention to his contemporaries. His only known interest in postwar Parisian abstract art was in de Staël when the artist exhibited in the Matthiesen Gallery in London in 1952.

Patrick Heron had been enthusiastic for Modern French painting since his teens and he had published numerous review and essays on the subject. An admirer of Cézanne and Matisse as well as Bonnard and Braque, Heron preferred the plastic quality of French painting to the literary tradition in English painting, at a time when these French masters were still subjected to the incomprehension of much of the English public. Heron was particularly interested in the 1946 Braque exhibition at the Tate Gallery; three years later Heron was able to visit Braque's studio where he was deeply impressed by Braque's treatment of colour and the structure of painting. For about six years from 1949 to 1955, Heron had been under Braque's influence although he was briefly lured to de Staël and occasionally showed his interest in other postwar Parisian abstract artists.

William Gear, the Scottish painter, was an exception in this respect. Gear won a travelling scholarship from Edinburgh College of Art, 1937-1938 and spent most of his time in Paris. He attended various academies and studied with Legér over the winter of 1937. Gear also

travelled extensively in Italy, Greece and the Balkans. After the war, he lived in Paris from 1947 to 1950 and knew many younger French artists such as Hartung, Pierre Soulages, Serge Poliakoff and Edouard Pignon. Gear came back England in 1950 after his increasingly commercial success following his exhibition at Gimpel Fils in May 1948. Gear was the first British painter to bring post-war Parisian abstraction to England and so became a figure of importance in the development of postwar abstraction, although it is difficult to assess to what extent he spread his knowledge to his peers. Gear located his own painting within a development loosely termed as lyrical abstraction. Roger Hilton, who shared with Gear many interests in French painting, was a friend of his. As a regular visitor to Paris since 1946 he sometimes met Gear there. Hilton's position in post-war British abstraction was similiar to that of Gear.

Alan Davie's travels in Europe for a year in 1948 - 1949 is frequently mentioned as an important event in post-war British abstract painting. Davie and his wife started their journey in Edinburgh in March 1949, with limited support from a travelling scholarship he had won before the war. In various venues in France and Switzerland he saw again works by Klee and Picasso which had impressed him when he saw Klee's exhibition at National Gallery and the Picasso's and Matisse's exhibitions at the V & A in 1945, in London. The contemporary art scene in Paris disappointed him but, as we shall discuss later, he was compensated by seeing paintings by Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline in Peggy Guggenheim's collection of American painting in Venice.

It appeared that, to the avant garde artists in London, contemporary art in France lacked the dynamism they later found in the paintings by the Abstract Expressionists. The prominent contemporary French artists Giacometti, Dubuffet, de Staël and Georges Mathieu were strong and original but, somehow, they did not have adequate critical support, as far as their presentation in Britain was concerned. Thus the

responses they provoked hardly achieved a significant momentum. On the other hand, Abstract Expressionism, increasingly hailed in the United States, was now presented to Europe in an organised manner. There were, for example, ambitious operations such as the two important touring exhibitions, *Modern Art from the United States* and *New American Painting* in 1956 and 1959 respectively, organised specifically for a European audience by the International Committee of the Museum of Modern Art - such a name for a committee must have been novel at the time. American painters involved with Abstract Expressionism outnumbered French artists working in a similar mode, and the scale and organisation of these American exhibitions all helped to assure maximum impact.

Few American artists appeared at exhibitions in London before 1956 while some major English artists, for example Nicholson and Shutherland, had regular exhibitions in New York. Ignorance of American contemporary art was common among artists and art critics although rumours about the new American art were in the air in the late 1940s. The American periodicals used by Clement Greenberg and other critics, including *Nation* and *Partisan Review*, had a very limited readership in Britain, even if they were available. The English periodical *Horizon*, edited by Cyril Connolly, showed particular interest in introducing American art and culture to its British readership. Clement Greenberg's article 'The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture: Art on the American Horizon,' was published in the October 1948 issue - a special issue dedicated to American culture. Readers of *Horizon* might have noticed Jackson Pollock's name for the first time as Greenberg made the claim here that Pollock was the most important living American painter. Greenberg's claim raised controversy at home.³

Art News of New York was a periodical most significant in supplying British artists and critics at large with information about the new trend in painting. The famous article by Harold Rosenberg, 'The

American Action Painters,' was published in *Art News* in 1952, although it was found a wider readership only after 1956 when Abstract Expressionist paintings were seen in *Modern Art from the United States* at the Tate Gallery. Thomas B. Hess, who held the editorship of the magazine, contributed reports on the art scene in New York which were valuable to the interested British. Hess' writing in *Art News* was particularly appreciated by the artists and critics around Alloway.⁴

Hess was also the author of *Abstract Paintings: Background and American Phase*, published in 1951 and the first literature dealing with Abstract Expressionism at length.⁵ Although the first half of the book was devoted to the European parentage of Abstract Expressionism Hess gave a historic weight to his main subject. The most thorough study in the book was devoted to de Kooning. The next comprehensive survey of the subject is the weighty catalogue for the exhibition *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America* at the MoMA in 1951 which was the contribution of Andrew C. Ritchie, director of the Painting and Sculpture Department of MOMA. Both books stood alone until the sixties - there were no other books on the subject for the whole of the 1950s.⁶

Towards the end of the fifties there was even a periodical that was almost entirely dedicated to Abstract Expressionism. *It Is*, launched in New York in 1957, became immediately available in some London art galleries including Zwemmer's and Tiranti's.⁷ Apart from the Abstract Expressionists who soon became familiar names to the British, it introduced artists such as Ad Reinhardt, Ludwig Sander, Ray Parker, Adolph Gottlieb and Leon Smith, none of whom were well known in Britain until the late fifties. Another new publication, *Art International* (its first issue named as *European Art This Month*) was published by an American at Lugano, Switzerland, in 1958. Many Abstract Expressionists were discussed and new developments in the USA were reported in the pages of this readily accessible monthly periodical.

As many had pointed out, the British and Americans share the same language so that British artists as a whole were better informed of the developments in America but they had very limited access to the actual works of art, especially before 1956. Although the literature on the subject normally was accompanied by reproductions it was impossible for the qualities of the originals to be read from reproductions. It was particularly a problem with Abstract Expressionist paintings as most of them are enormous in scale.

As early as 1946 some wary American critics and dealers attempted to test the European response to the new American painting, well before they had convinced themselves the value of the new painting. Exhibitions with a large number Abstract Expressionist paintings were first sent to galleries in Paris. Gottlieb and Baziotes were in the Galerie Meaght in Paris in 1947, to which exhibition Rosenberg contributed an introduction. Hofmann had an one-man exhibition in the same gallery in 1949. Peggy Guggenheim also showed her collection of mainly early Abstract Expressionist paintings or, to be precise, the American Surrealist paintings, in Venice, Milan, Amsterdam, Brussels and Zurich between 1948 and 1949 once she had returned to Europe from New York. Pollock, Kline and de Kooning were in the prestigious Venice Biennale in 1950. In Germany there was a mixed exhibition in Berlin in 1951 that included major Abstract Expressionists. Galerie de France in Paris staged a large exhibition of American avant-garde in 1952. Pollock again had a one-man exhibition at Galerie Facchetti in 1952. In the early days Abstract Expressionist painting could be better accessed in other European countries than in Britain.

As mentioned earlier, Alan Davie happened to be in Venice in 1948-49 and he became the first British painter - perhaps the first of all European artists - to realise the significance of American Abstract Expressionism. Davie experienced mainly Pollock's furious brushwork and

ritualistic themes in his paintings produced during his formative years in the early 1940s which were strongly represented in Peggy Guggenheim's collection. They had an immediate effect on Davie as he soon painted in a manner very similar to Pollock's. As Davie exhibited his new paintings in the Gimpel Fils in 1950 and taught at the Central School of Art, he in his turn wielded influence upon a number of younger artists.⁸

Another British artist who had first-hand experience of Abstract Expressionism and the artists themselves, in these early days, was William Scott. Scott went to North America to fulfil teaching contracts in Canada and United States in 1953. On his return journey from Maryland, he stayed in New York for about two weeks and visited some leading Abstract Expressionists including Pollock, Rothko, Motherwell and Gottlieb. Although he passed on his impression of the New York art to some of his fellow artists, especially those at and around St. Ives. neither he, nor his friends showed any particular interest in American painting at this time.⁹

For the majority of British artists, the revelation of works of art by Abstract Expressionists came suddenly in the mid-fifties. Within just a couple of years British artists were exposed to almost the full range of Abstract Expressionist paintings. What follows is a brief summary, arranged chronologically, of the exhibitions in the 1950's solely or partly dedicated to Abstract Expressionism.¹⁰

The American Painting, Tate Gallery in 1946 was a large-scale survey exhibition that went back to the eighteenth century. Two paintings, *Jury of Three* and *Joy of Living* 1943, by Adolph Gottlieb and Robert Motherwell respectively, were included in the exhibition but, as American Surrealist paintings, they were unnoticed in the press. A small Pollock abstraction, the first Pollock painting in Britain, was lent by Arthur Jeffress to a mixed exhibition of paintings from local private collection, in Winchester in 1947. There was no other record of the

painting except for that noted by Bowness because, perhaps, Pollock was still an American artist unknown to the British at the time.¹¹ This was in contrast to the situation in the United States where Pollock was being hailed by Clement Greenberg as the best living American painter.¹²

Those who visited Paris and Venice during this period may also have seen some Abstract Expressionist paintings. Pollock's works, including one of the first drip paintings - *Enchanted Forest* of 1947 and *Two* and *Circumcision*, both of 1945, were in the Guggenheim collection in Venice. Pollock, together with Franz Kline and Motherwell, was also represented in the 1950 Venice Biennale by three new paintings including *Number 1* of 1948 and, *Number 2* and *Number 23* of 1949. A Pollock exhibition was held at Galerie Fachetti in 1952 in Paris, which resulted from the effort by the French critic Michel Tapié. Tapié played a major role in promoting French Art Informale painters whose interests in painting overlapped with those of the Abstract Expressionists and his broad conception of an international trend covered these two branches of artists - the gestural Abstract Expressionists and on the other hand Wols, Jean Fautrier, Soulages and Hans Hartung, as well as the Spanish Antony Tapes. An English version of the exhibition called *Opposing Forces* was shown in the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in 1953. There were three paintings each by Pollock, Sam Francis, Georges Mathieu, Alfonso Ossorio, Jean-Paul Riopelle and Serpan and seven drawings by Henri Michaux. The Pollocks - the first widely seen in London - were two small paintings of 1949, and a very large (9' x 18') picture of the same year. But the Pollocks in the exhibition were put in without an explanation and were in fact overshadowed by the other exhibitors who were described by Tapié as artists 'attracted by authentic adventures.'¹³

This period showed British artists encountering Abstract Expressionism almost casually. It was not until 1955 they began to see Abstract Expressionist painting in large quantity and good quality.

Tobey's retrospective at the Institute of Contemporary Art in May 1955 provided the first occasion and it was important that Tobey himself came in person. The exhibition received a favourable review from Patrick Heron who had criticised the Pollocks in *Opposing Force* less than two years previously.¹⁴ The reaction from Heron suggested a change in attitude towards Abstract Expressionism.

The most important showcase for Abstract Expressionism was *Modern Art in the United States* at Tate Gallery in June-July 1956. An exhibition organised by the Museum of Modern Art of New York, it also toured in all major capitals in Western Europe. The exhibition covers twentieth century American painting and sculpture with 127 works drawn mostly from the Museum's own collection. Abstract Expressionist paintings were accommodated in the last gallery. Among them were Pollock's *Number 1* 1948 and *She-Wolf* 1943; Kline's *Chief* 1950; Clyfford Still's *Painting* 1951; de Kooning's *Woman* 1950-52, *Painting* 1948 and *Ganssvoort Street* 1950-51; Motherwell's *Granada* 1949; Rothko's *Number 1* 1949 and *Number 10* 1950; and paintings by Gorky, Guston and Tomlin. It was the first sizeable number of Abstract Expressionist paintings seen in Britain. Both the lay-out of exhibition and catalogue gave preference to the Abstract Expressionists. The response from the press to the exhibits in the gallery was sensational although there were many reports based on incomprehension. *Art News and Review* and *Architectural Review* were the vehicles for the advocates of the new American abstract painting. The reviews written by Alloway and Melville for the two publications were only about the roomful of exhibits of Abstract Expressionism. Heron wrote an enthusiastic review for *Arts New York*. His criticism was extraordinarily frank and supportive at the time, although he criticised in strict formal terms certain 'defects' in the paintings. From now on an appetite for the new American painting was to be cultivated. The response by British artists to the exhibition was rapid, as shown in the few British abstract painting

exhibitions immediately after: *Statement: a Review of British Abstract Art 1956* and *Metavisual, Tachiste Abstract 1957*.

For the next few years, Abstract Expressionist painting was much in demand in both public and private galleries in London. The exhibition *Paintings from the Guggenheim Museum* shown at the Tate Gallery in 1957 included Pollock's early works only. There were a string of curated exhibitions at various venues that fused Abstract Expressionism with the French Art Informale in an attempt to unite them as an international phenomenon, if not a movement. The Arts Council's touring exhibition *New Trends in Painting* in 1956 showed paintings from the Power Collection. In the exhibition two American artists living in Paris, Sam Francis and Paul Jenkins, were featured along with the Europeans Dubuffet, de Staël, Ernst, Appel, Riopelle and Soulages. Another Arts Council touring exhibition called *Some Paintings from the E. J. Power Collection*, 1958, included two paintings each by Pollock, Kline, Rothko and Still, and one each by de Kooning, Dubuffet and Tapies. Lawrence Alloway helped with organising the two touring exhibitions and wrote the introductions to them. To some extent, these Arts Council exhibitions gave a seal of official approval to the general trend led by Abstract Expressionism. In the private sector, Tooth's Gallery staged *Exploration of Paint* in 1957 in which Jenkins and Sam Francis were included. Sam Francis had a one-man exhibition at the Gimpel Fils in the same year. Herbert Read, who had already expressed his particular admiration for Sam Francis in 1956, wrote an introduction to the exhibition.¹⁵ Sam Francis received excessive admiration from British critics and artists for his light, lyrical colours and fluid touches of paint. He certainly had stolen some attention from Pollock whose heroic characteristic seemed to have dimmed in British eyes.

As the Gimpel Fils, Arthur Tooth's and Waddington Galleries all took on Abstract Expressionists, the E. J. Power Collection grew steadily

as the only substantial and important collection of Abstract Expressionist paintings in Britain in the fifties.¹⁶ The Tate Gallery started to collect Abstract Expressionist paintings in 1957 when it bought a small Sam Francis, from his exhibition at the Gimpel Fils. The Tate Gallery's Abstract Expressionist painting collection, however, expanded significantly only in the following decade. It was quite extraordinary that, as early as 1960 in the Newcastle Festival, an Abstract Expressionist painting exhibition at the Laing Art Gallery assembled all its exhibits from British sources.

Towards the end of the fifties, some splendid exhibitions were devoted to Abstract Expressionists. There were important retrospectives of Abstract Expressionists in London's major public galleries. Pollock's retrospective, organised by the MOMA's International Committee was held at Whitechapel Gallery in November 1958 after it had toured in Europe. Other grand retrospectives include Gottlieb's exhibition at the ICA Gallery in May 1960 and Rothko's retrospective at Whitechapel in October 1961.

The exhibition with the most grandeur was *New American Painting*. Having toured eight European capitals, it arrived at the Tate Gallery in 1959. Compared with the *Modern Art from the United States* exhibition in 1956, this exhibition was all about the 'triumph' of the post-war American painting, more precisely, of the Abstract Expressionism. Alfred Barr revealed in his introduction, both terms 'action painting' and 'Abstract Expressionism' were considered as a title for the exhibition. To put the exhibition under the name 'American Painting' clarified the current status of Abstract Expressionism. The reporter for United States Information Service *Art News Bulletin* was very content that Sir John Rothenstein, director of the Tate Gallery, described *New American Painting* as an exhibition 'remarkable for its uncompromising, outspoken individuality.'¹⁷ The exhibition generated good publicity in the press

and radio and attracted a record attendance of 14,718 during its four-week showing.¹⁸

Seventeen artists were included in the exhibition - William Baziotes, James Brooks, Sam Francis, Arshile Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, Philip Guston, Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Theodoros Stamos, Clyfford Still, Bradley Walker Tomlin and Jack Tworkov. The real significance of the exhibition rested on the fact that it introduced the newest trend within the movement by bringing Barnett Newman to the notice of the British. Newman was the focus of the exhibition and immediately became a hero-figure for the younger generation artists. Bowness called this 'the knock-out blow as so far as some of the younger painters were concerned.'¹⁹

Abstract Expressionism was also hailed internationally at the end of the decade. Major Abstract Expressionists became again and again the subjects of various international art events. In the São Paulo Biennial in 1958 Pollock was represented by an one-man exhibition of his late paintings which constituted a section of the American exhibition. He was awarded a special 'hors de concours' citation from the international jury of critics from sixteen different countries, although he was not eligible for a prize, for only living artists might compete.²⁰ The same year major Abstract Expressionists were presented in the Brussels World's Fair. Pollock was featured again under the auspices of the MoMA International Programme in Documenta II in Kassel, Germany, in July 1959.

An interesting exhibition *Modern American Painting*, which declared its concern with contemporary American painting rather than Abstract Expressionism alone, toured to the City Art Gallery, York, in 1960. It was organised by the City Museum of St Louis, Missouri and composed of 84 pictures, 29 of which were paintings by Abstract Expressionists. Although they were recognised as 'bright lights of American painting' by the

reviewer for the *Architectural Design*,²¹ the organisers of the exhibition were quite determined to present an exhibition that should, in their view, reflect the real situation of contemporary American painting. They were unhappy with those exhibitions arranged by the International Committee of the MoMA. They included the fashionable names of Pollock, de Kooning, Rothko and some others along with the realists such as Edward Hopper and Ben Shahn, for a purpose that was different from the big Abstract Expressionist exhibitions in the London public galleries. Here the works by the Abstract Expressionists were small or medium in size and they could only be seen as samples of their usually large canvases. This was deliberately arranged by the organisers, as it was implied in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue that Pollock, de Kooning, Tobey and other Abstract Expressionists and non-figurative painters' styles as 'personal' while Burchfield, Hartly, Hopper and others were 'American painters.' The unfortunate experience of the organisers was that their purpose was largely foiled by the officials at York, who had put de Kooning, Pollock, Tomlin and Guston in the best places in the Gallery.

At the turn of the fifties and the sixties, both Post-Painterly Abstraction artists and Pop artists took over from the original Abstract Expressionists as the trend-leaders of the New York art world and the British artists were informed of the changes immediately. The exhibition programmes in London were brought up to date accordingly. Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitsky as well as the Hard-Edge painter Ellsworth Kelly soon filled the London galleries.

The sensational presentation of Abstract Expressionism in Britain and in Europe in the few years stirred up a genuine interest in New York. With the help of advances in modern transport, better means of communication and printing technologies, information about new developments in the United States was readily available to a large

audience. The glossy American specialist art magazines were studied avidly by anyone who had access to them. New tendencies in New York or anywhere in the West, could be shown in London almost simultaneously and, indeed, vice versa. Arts, like anything else, after the fifties were truly international, the first time in the history of art.

The number of British visitors to New York increased dramatically; more and more British artists would see New York themselves and gain their advantages of personal contact with their American contemporaries. The majority of the Middle Generation painters visited New York at some point. Alan Davie went there in 1956, Peter Lanyon in 1957, Terry Frost in 1958 and Heron in 1958 - they all also made subsequent visits to the city. All of them managed to meet leading Abstract Expressionists, during their visits. To those Middle Generation artists, the attraction of the New York art world was its artistic milieu and its supportive audience. Terry Frost, for example, was impressed by the way in which New York artists were respected and by the patronage of the big corporations. As an artist Frost felt 'tall' over there.²² It is worth mentioning that only a few years ago American artists fled to Europe for exactly these advantages that were not available in New York.²³

Alloway and William Turnbull visited the United States in 1958 and 1957 respectively. Both trips were funded by the American Embassy and the money certainly yielded good returns. Alloway visited more than a dozen cities in the United States. Upon his return he published several articles in *The Listener* and gave a lecture at the ICA about his experience in the United States. Turnbull, who was quickly establishing himself as commanding figure to young art students in London, shared his experience and knowledge of the art of the United States with the younger generation.

In 1951 Patrick Heron was actually awarded a scholarship to stay in the United States for a period but he did not have a go. Ten years

later the situation had changed and there was no question in the minds of young artists that New York was the place for anyone who aimed to become the vanguard of the time, an attitude like that of many ambitious artists in the previous fifty years to Paris. In reality most artists who made their names in the sixties, including Richard Smith, Anthony Caro, Harold Cohen and David Hockney, had either visited or lived in New York.

New York was now a prominent centre of art activities; it not only became the largest showcase of contemporary art but also provided a developed market for contemporary art. In the sixties what was achieved in Britain was assessed mainly against what had happened in the United States. Contemporary art was, from the point of view of London, associated with New York instead of Paris.

It needs addressing that the three institutions in London, United States Information Service at the American Embassy, The Arts Council of Britain and The Institute of Contemporary Arts, had helped to present Abstract Expressionism in Britain in ways that were appropriate with their respectively assigned functions. Their work had definitely affected the critical and general reception of Abstract Expressionism in Britain, although the extent is hard to define.

The USIS was an agency attached to American Embassies across Europe. The official function of the USIS was stated in the *USIS Art News Bulletin*, its own bi-monthly publication, as:

The United States Information Service, part of the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square, London, is an overseas office of the United States Information Agency, Washington D. C. Its purpose is to make available in Britain as much information as possible about the United States, its people, its policies, its institutions and its cultural activities.²⁴

In 1946 the organisers of *Advancing American Art*, an exhibition proposed to tour to Europe, could not win the Congress' approval for public funding because a government patronage to a private gallery (the exhibition venue in Paris) did not seem quite legitimate. Having recognised the difficulty through this failed attempt, the Roosevelt administration preferred to bypass Congress by using the facilities such as the USIS finance private cultural ventures abroad.²⁵

The USIS in the American Embassy in London was busy in fulfilling its proposed assignment. It was involved with the London art world in many ways: publishing *Art News bulletin*; providing open access to its library and providing travelling funds to selected British art personnel (among many of them, Alloway and Turnbull); lending slides and other visual materials to interested parties; providing help to British venues accommodating American exhibitions. The USIS' own gallery also maintained a vivid exhibition programme about American contemporary art and culture. Most of its exhibitions were like the one called *20th Century Highlights of American Painting* in 1959 and were aimed at the mass rather than the small avant garde artist community.

The USIS operations became more active after Stefan Munsing became the cultural affair officer at the Embassy. A London young artist James Meller's recall of what Stefan Munsing and the USIS' facilities in the late fifties had offered was particularly telling:

The other connection...was with the American Embassy and Stefan Munsing, What was dramatic then was that suddenly we saw the American paintings, and that was through Munsing. And a lot of those early (i.e. mid-1950s) ICA exhibitions were helped by the embassy. And Munsing was also enormously involved in sending a lot of the English painters off to the States.... His office in the embassy was sort of open house.... An amazing library, of course, in which we could just go in and order magazines and books, and records as well.²⁶

The Arts Council of Great Britain played a unique role in this matter. On the occasion of *Modern Painting from the United States* at the Tate in 1956 the Arts Council worked together with the American institutions and enterprises in presenting the exhibition. The Arts Council's 1956 annual report recorded that it was an anonymous and generous American offer that enabled the Council to produce the accompanying catalogue. The few exhibitions organised by Alloway in the name of The Arts Council in the late fifties and early sixties including *Some Paintings from the J. E. Power Collection* in 1956, *New Trends in Painting* in 1957 and *Abstract Impressionism* in 1958 were significant as they indicated to some degree an official approval to the mode of painting dominated by Abstract Expressionism. Furthermore the Arts Council rewarded those who followed the trend by offering them solo or group exhibitions; for example, the second *Situation* exhibition in 1961, conferred an unusual official, also crucial, recognition to the young generation avant garde artists.

The Institute of Contemporary Arts also played an important part in promoting American art and culture, including Abstract Expressionism. The ICA was placed in this position under rather complicated circumstances. Since the end of the sixties there have been allegations about the American governments' use of art for political ends. There were many revealing discoveries of how The United States employed overseas organisations to serve its confrontation with Russia in the Cold War. The ICA was seen in a similar context as an important institution exploited by American governments to promote American art in Britain.²⁷ While the evidence available did allow such an assumption, the Institute was involved with the presentation of Abstract Expressionism in England for also a variety of other reasons.

The Institute itself was actively looking for American patronage largely because of its persistent financial plights. The ICA was an

institution set up by Herbert Read and Roland Penrose in the late 1940s, originally, as an equivalent of the MoMA in New York in the sense that it would retain a large degree of independence by excluding funding from official channels. Financial independence should allow the proposed institute to fulfil its role as a shelter for and a supporter of experimental art, without fearing interruption from governments and art establishments. When it became clear that there was not enough private fund available, these founders of the ICA had to make a compromise and seek funding from the Arts Council. While eventually the new institute was partially funded by the government, it strove to take on its proposed role. It was called as 'Advance Guard H.Q.' by *The Evening Standard* when the new ICA premises at 17 Dover Street was inaugurated on 12 December 1950.

From the very beginning the financial stability of the Institute was in question. The Institute was rather isolated for two reasons. On the one hand the role imposed on the Institute had predetermined its single focus on unpopular activities. On the other hand the Institute's ideological inclination was to the left, one can easily read a leftish tone from the writings of some core members of the institute.²⁸ It was an obvious continuation of their flirtation with the ideals of communism during the thirties. As a result, membership of the Institute was not particularly desirable. A scandal of Soviet spies closely connected with the ICA in 1951 even put the institute into a real crisis. Both Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, the two exposed Soviet spies, joined the ICA in May and October 1950 respectively. Their story was revealed in virtually every national and provincial newspaper so that the allegation of links between communism and the ICA's self-important activities arose easily. A direct consequence of this catastrophic publicity was that its memberships remained difficult to sell. The funding from the Arts Council had never been sufficient to make the Institute viable.²⁹

The Institute became a victim caught in the Cold War and the political pressure the Institute felt was obvious.³⁰ Nevertheless finance was even more of a deadly problem for its survival. It was exactly at this time that the ICA increased its programmes of American art and culture, although, its political orientation to the left was, paradoxically, kept unchanged. The Institute had never been anti-American, on the contrary, 'from its outset, the ICA had been welcoming of American art - and money.'³¹ Before the official opening of Dover Street premises; the ballet promoter and wealthy American Lincoln Kirstein paid for the catalogues for an exhibition called *American Symbolic Realism* in 1950.

There were disputes among its members on drawing in American money in the early days. Roland Penrose was desperate for the survival of the Institute and would see no real conflict between American money and British culture. Read was rather wary about it as he was already an uneasy witness to the effects on art from corporate sponsorship during his first visit to the States. But, however reluctantly, Read at least approached American foundations and got the results; for example John D. Rockefeller's unsolicited gift of \$2,500 for the Institute in 1952.³²

In early 1951 the American public relation expert, Patrick Dolan, timely volunteered his services to improve the image of the ICA and to find the big sum of money it desperately needed. Another American Anthony Kloman, the brother-in-law of the architect Philip Janson, was drawn in by Dolan as Director of Public Relations and he certainly arranged more exhibitions from the United States. It seemed the ICA was not selective in staging American programmes during this period. Exhibitions like *Saul Steinberg Drawings; Photographs from Life* (sponsored by *Time-Life*) and *The Old and New in South-East Asia* (photographs by Derek Knight and sponsored by Shell) shown at the ICA, were certainly not the sort of experimental art the Institute was supposed to support. Perhaps the most

notorious of them was *Unknown Political Prisoner* competition, for which Kloman was responsible. This American propaganda exercise against the Communist regime in Russia, was accepted by the ICA managing committee for the tempting offer of £16,000 of management fee from Jock Whitney, the publisher of the *International Herald Tribune* and an honorary trustee of the Museum of Modern art in New York. It was alleged later that money may have been given on behalf of the CIA.³³

It became a consistent policy to draw American fund for the Institute and in 1956 the Managing Committee proposed itself to American Embassy that,

The Institute is unable to develop adequately at its present premises and the managing committee is not content to operate within its present resources permanently, when the Institute expands, as the managing committee are determined it shall, it will be possible to expand greatly all the activities promoting American and European cultural relations. The Institute should serve as a gateway to Europe for visiting Americans and as a centre for the flow of cultural information between our two continents.³⁴

Attached to the memo was a list of events concerning the United States that took place at the ICA. Both *Opposing Forces*, which included paintings by Jackson Pollock and Sam Francis, and Mark Tobey's retrospective were on the list. These were rare occasions British artists had access to Abstract Expressionist paintings, before *Modern Art from the United States* arrived the Tate in 1956. The prominent Americans the ICA had invited over to give lectures and talks included Thomas B. Hess and Alfred Barr.

Although the ICA had been involved in promoting American art including the Abstract Expressionism, for some time before 1956, it was not until the *Modern Art from the United States* exhibition at the Tate Gallery in 1956, that Independent Group members, especially Alloway,

William Turnbull and Toni del Renzio, started to exploit Abstract Expressionism. The number of lectures and panel discussions about Abstract Expressionism increased in the subsequent years. These young artists and critics had no duty to finance the Institute and their attitude to Abstract Expressionism was largely decided by their self-assigned task to tackle the problems faced by contemporary art.

There were points of profound disagreement between them and Read. In the early fifties the prominent figures in the Institute disengaged themselves from the contemporary art. Take Read as an example; his modernism was tied to the thirties and associated with the names such as Moore, Hepworth, Nicholson and Gabo. He was out of touch with the contemporary art scene, as shown by an incident when Tooth's gallery invited Read to contribute to its second 'Critic's Choice' in 1956. Read was asked to make the selection: the paintings had to be by living English painters and there were to be 3 to 5 paintings by each artist. Read was not able to go further with confidence after he settled on paintings by Nicholson and Pasmore. He 'panicked' and consulted Patrick Heron, whom he had known since 1944. As a result of Heron's advice Terry Frost, Alan Davie, Peter Kinley and Heron himself were included in the exhibition.³⁵

Although Read was very much sympathetic to the younger generation whose artistic persuasion was more or less related to what he stood for, he could not redefine his aesthetics in terms used by the emerging young critics and artists (Eduardo Paolozzi, Nigel Henderson, William Turnbull, Toni del Renzio, Richard Hamilton, Rayner Banham and, later, Alloway). By November 1952, the young artists and critics had formed the Independent Group - 'independent' in the sense that they were affiliated with the avant-garde and not committed to a 'received' history of art. Read increasingly became the subject of humiliation by these junior members in the ICA. Alloway later recalled that 'there was nobody much else to

attack. He was always interested in the visual arts in England.... Herbert was really all there was.'³⁶

Read's theory was based on a quasi-religious and Jungian archetypal symbolic order. Read describes geometric principles of abstraction, for example, as 'a means to higher world.' He was not certain of his attitude towards Abstract Expressionism at the time. Read's sympathy with Abstract Expressionism reached as far as de Kooning and Sam Francis only. In de Kooning he saw 'some kind of titanic struggle with the shadow, the dark aspects of the mind,' such 'fanatical' faith appealing to him.³⁷ Sam Francis was an artist who searched for forms 'behind' the veil of consciousness and with 'passionate honesty' Francis was trying to uncover the "'objective correlative" of his most inward awareness.'³⁸ Read had only a limited admiration for Jackson Pollock's drip paintings as he maintained that an artist had to exert control over his material.

Since Read found post-war Britain incredibly humdrum, he retreated back to the ideal world of symbolic forms. Read's 'purism' was attacked by many members of Independent Group.³⁹ They also found post-war Britain depressing, but they had no belief in an ideal world beyond the present one. Unlike Read, they decided to make do with the actual physical world. American culture presented them with the most satisfactory material world:

We goggled at the graphics and the colour-work in adverts for appliances that were almost inconceivable in power-short Britain, and food ads so luscious you wanted to eat them. Remember we had spent our teenage years surviving the horrors and deprecations of a six-year war. For us, the fruits of peace had to be tangible, preferably edible. Those ads... looked like Paradise Regained.⁴⁰

Their generation experienced the post war reconstruction in which the American aid was almost a necessity and many of them became pro-American

by instinct. Alloway, for instance, was ridiculed by Clement Greenberg as an enthusiast for anything American.⁴¹

Whilst Abstract Expressionism and certain phenomena in American culture facilitated their identification, the discussion and promotion of Abstract expressionism was jeopardised by the conflict between them and Read. Abstract Expressionism was obviously used as a device for Read's attackers to defy his aesthetics. It is interesting that, most of his opponents from the Independent Group embraced Abstract Expressionism even before they had investigated it thoroughly. It seemed merely the fact that it was from the United States counted for their enthusiasm. Lawrence Alloway applauded Abstract Expressionism at the time when he could only identify it by random concepts; for example, Alloway could only tell his readers that America was 'not more alien' to the British than any other major countries in Europe were.

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- 1 Clement Greenberg, A symposium: the state of American Art, *Magazine of Art*, March 1949.
 - 2 Margaret Garlake, 'Between Paris and New York: Critical Constructions of "Englishness," c. 1945-60,' Micheal Gee, ed. *Art Criticism Since 1900*, Manchester University Press, 1990.
 - 3 Greenberg was ridiculed for this judgement of Pollock, as well as for the favourable comments in the article about David Smith and Hans Hofmann, by George L. K. Morris in the *Time* magazine, 1 December 1947.
 - 4 Lawrence Alloway, 'Field conversation,' *Abstract Expressionism: the critical development*, ed., Michael Auping, Thames and Hudson, 1987.
 - 5 Thomas B. Hess,, *Abstract Paintings: Background and American Phase*, The Viking Press, New York, 1951.
 - 6 William Seitz's *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America*, his doctoral dissertation at Princeton University in 1955, remained unpublished until 1983.
 - 7 C. Meaker, *The Situation Exhibitions*, MPhil thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 1979, p. 27.
 - 8 William Crozier, a Scottish painter in London, went to his studio to see how he was working. William Crozier, 'A beacon in the gloaming - a memory of Alan Davie in the 1950's' *Art Line*, Vol. 5, No. 3, Oct./Nov. 1990.
 - 9 Interview with Terry Frost, the author, 1993.
 - 10 Thanks to Alan Bowness's essay, 'The American invasion and the British response,' *Studio International*, June 1967, which had well documented the American exhibitions in Britain and is the most important source for the list.
 - 11 Alan Bowness, 'The American invasion and the British response,' *Studio International*, June 1967.
 - 12 Clement Greenberg, 'American painting on the horizon,' *Horizon*, 1949.
 - 13 Quoted in Robert Melville, 'Action painting, New York - Paris - London,' *Ark*, Autumn 1956, p. 30.
 - 14 Patrick Heron, 'Opposing Force,' *New Statesman and Nation*, 21 Feb. 1953.
 - 15 An expanded version 'An art of internal necessity' was published in *Quadrum 1*, Brussels, 1956.
 - 16 Alloway acted as E. J. Power's advisor.
 - 17 Quoted in *The USIS Art News Bulletin*, April-May 1959, p. 18.
 - 18 *The USIS Art News Bulletin*, April-May 1959, p. 18.

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- 19 Alan Bowness, 'American invasion and British response,' *Studio International*, July 1967.
- 20 As reported in the United States Information Service Art News Bulletin, Office of Cultural Affairs, American Embassy, Nov./Dec. 1959, p. 3.
- 21 *Architectural Design*, Sep. 1960, p. 340.
- 22 Interview with Terry Frost by the author, 1993
- 23 See John-Franklin Koenig, 'Abstract chaud in Paris in the 1950s,' Serge Guilbaut ed., *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris and Montreal 1945-1964*, The MIT Press, 1990.
- 24 The USIS Art News Bulletin, July 1957, p. 19.
- 25 This strategy was well known after the studies by Christopher Lasch, 'The Cultural Cold War: A Short History of the Congress for Cultural Freedom,' in *the Agony of the American Left* (New York: Random House, 1968), pp. 63-13, and Eva Cockcroft, 'Abstract Expressionism,' pp. 39-41; as well as a number of journalists, especially Jason Epstein, 'The CIA and the Intellectuals,' *New York Review of Books*, April 20 1967, pp. 16-20.
- 26 James Meller, Interview, 12, March, 1984 in Robbins, David ed. *The Independent Group: Post War Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty*, MIT Press, p. 40.
- 27 Anne Massey, *The Independent Group, Towards a Redefinition*, PhD thesis, Newcastle upon Tyne Polytechnic, 1984.
- 28 For example in Read, Herbert, 'Surrealism supplement,' *Left Review*, July 1936, p. viii.
- 29 The annual maintenance of Dover Street premise was expected to run £3,000 a year over income from subscriptions.
- 30 James King, *The Last Modern, A Life of Herbert Read*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London. 1990. p. 259
- 31 Ibid., p. 257.
- 32 Ibid., p. 241.
- 33 Anne Massey, 'Cold War culture and the I.C.A.,' *Block*,
- 34 ICA Managing Committee memo, *American Culture and the institute of Contemporary Arts*, 1957, Tate Gallery Archives.
- 35 James King, *The Last modern, a Life of Herbert Read*, Weidenfield and Nicolson, London, 1990, p. 276.

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- 36 Lawrence Alloway interviewed by Rayner Banham, 25 May 1977, ms, the ICA, London.
- 37 Herbert Read, Letter to Edward Dahlberg, 24 March 1956. MS Texas.
- 38 Herbert Read, 'Recent tendencies in abstract painting,' *Canadian Art* xv, Aug. 1958, p. 200.
- 39 Anne Massey, *The Independent Group: Towards a Redefinition*, PhD thesis, Newcastle upon Tyne Polytechnic, 1984, p. 223.
- 40 As cited by Anne Massey, *The Independent Group: Towards a Redefinition*, PhD thesis, Newcastle upon Tyne Polytechnic, 1984, p. 246.
- 41 Clement Greenberg, 'How art writing earns its bad name,' *Encounter*, December 1962, reprinted in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. John O'Brian.

Chapter 4

THE BRITISH RESPONSE - THE MIDDLE GENERATION

There were British artists who responded to Abstract Expressionism immediately and positively. Indeed acceptance first came from these artists, when they either incorporated elements from certain Abstract Expressionists in their own works or expressed their appreciation explicitly in words. The critical acceptance, which is to be discussed in another chapter, was slower and took much longer.

There were incidental comments on Abstract Expressionism by some senior figures in the older generation of avant garde artists. Nicholson, for example, kept working in the style he was accustomed to and was nevertheless sympathetic to Abstract Expressionism as shown in his statement: "Action painting" is, as I see it a particular healthy free painting development.¹ Another senior artist, Victor Pasmore, was too busy with his own experiment with a constructivist approach to abstraction and temporarily abandoned painting in favour of relief. He was at the time convinced that if abstract art was going to survive and develop, it would be in three dimensional works. There were points of connection between his work and American painting, particularly those by Motherwell and Kline but only after he resumed painting at the end of the fifties.

Rodrigo Moynihan was probably the only British artist in his age group actually to switch into a working mode similar to gestural Abstract Expressionists after his portrait painting had brought him a reputation as well as prestige. In fact Moynihan as a veteran of the Objective Abstraction of the thirties was familiar with spontaneous and painterly abstract painting.² He started, or resumed, a free, spontaneous mode of painting in London in 1955-1956 and continued after he moved to France in

the early sixties. In works like *Painting - Grey and Violet* 1955 Moynihan created a dramatic painting surface that resemble to 'rock face, dry strait pines, the rough crust of earth bolted areas of light and shadow.'³ The composition had an 'alloverness' and paint was applied spontaneously. These qualities of painting could be connected with either late Monet or Turner, as well as Chinese landscape paintings by Li Chen, Li Tang, Ma Yuan, and Xia Qui. The sharp and explicit, sometimes excessive, brushwork in the paintings by these Chinese painters was visible in Moynihan's new abstract paintings. As a matter of fact, their painting had been a source of inspiration to him from the early thirties.⁴ However, in view of the timing of this swift change, that is when Abstract Expressionism was in a high profile and concurrent with the similar trend in France, he must have been most encouraged by the new American painting.

Moynihan's change was actually seen as a result of the Abstract Expressionist influence when his new abstract paintings were included in *Statement: a Review of British Abstract Art* in 1956. Alloway singled out his paintings as '(the) greatest change to note.'⁵ Moynihan was not, presumably, influenced by any particular Abstract Expressionist painters or paintings, nor the French ones in the similar realm, although he admired Sam Francis. It is more likely that the current trend came as a late confirmation of what he had done twenty years ago. Moynihan was also included in *Metavisual, Tachiste, Abstract* at Redfern Gallery in 1957 and Arts Council's *Abstract Impressionism* of 1958 - the other two important exhibitions surveying and assessing post-war abstract art in Britain. Moynihan's revival in the scene of avant garde art was an extraordinary case.

When the heyday of the British chapter of international abstraction in the thirties passed as the war was dangerously close to Britain, the remaining part of the movement, Ben Nicholson, Naum Gabo and

Barbara Hepworth, moved to St Ives. Their presence at St Ives, (Gabo left for America later in 1940) led to a dominance of abstract art in the artist community there. As their own art basically did not go further from what they had already achieved, the significance of their presence there rested on the education of a sophisticated group of younger painters including Peter Lanyon, Terry Frost, Bryan Wynter, among others.

What the St Ives' young artists had inherited from them was a workable formula to incorporate a sense of their natural surroundings with abstract or semi-abstract form. In the early fifties Lanyon and Frost had successfully incorporated in their painting abstract forms and their physical and emotional experience in a particular place. The worked out formula allowed immediate experience of the natural surroundings - rock, sand, vegetation, sea as well light and weather - to be later developed into forms in painting and construction. In this way geometric forms could flow from mind while the execution of painting was still technically sound.

Between 1951 and 1953 they were joined by some better established, but less radical, painters including Heron, Roger Hilton and William Scott. Heron and Hilton met Frost and Lanyon at the Artist International Association exhibition in 1951. Heron had regularly stayed at St Ives before he settled there permanently in early 1956. William Scott became associated with St Ives painters after he started to teach at the Bath Academy of Arts at Corsham in 1952 where Frost and Lanyon joined the teaching team part time. Heron's term the Middle Generation roughly covered those painters, and Alan Davie. These better established painters were generally more sophisticated about French painting and had closer relation with French art and artists.

At the time they did not have many things in common as far as their artistic persuasion was concerned. What associated them loosely was perhaps the similar experience in their development as artists and they

emerged at roughly the same time. The Middle Generation artists in general had a disrupted art education and career while they engaged in art with great degree of sincerity. They emerged soon after 1950 and their relatively quick success may be attributed to a number of factors. The war, for example, broke the continuity of art education and consequently there was a vacuum to be filled; the war had also broken to some degree the hierarchy of the art world so some St Ives artists were fortunate enough to form a close relationship with well established artists; more importantly perhaps, they were the first generation artists to benefit from the new state sponsorship, as performed by the Arts Council of Great Britain and the British Council which had acquired considerable skills of promotion during the war. Patrick Heron proved particularly valuable in promoting St Ives abstract artists in a national and, later, in an international scale.

In the first half of the fifties the Middle Generation painters gradually outnumbered the constructivists who worked in a mode of more strictly defined abstract art. It was the Middle Generation painters, who were already working in a relatively free painterly style, were the subject of the discussion of Abstract Expressionist influence in Britain. Abstract Expressionist painting was, it seems, appealing at first to those who affiliated with modern French painting, these were, Davie, Wynter and Heron.

Alloway's *Nine Abstract Artists* in 1954, which recorded the new development of abstract art at the time, is an useful reference in assessing what the status of some major abstract painters. Among the Middle Generation artists who were pursuing 'irrational expression,' Terry Frost, William Scott, Roger Hilton, Adrian Heath and Anthony Hill (although Heath may have more geometric elements than the others') were included by Alloway. Davie and Heron were not included; nevertheless the former was mentioned in the introduction. Davie's position was probably a

difficult one as some of his paintings produced in 1953 were the most radical painting in Britain before 1955. Heron's painting, so far, was explicitly representational and was certainly not 'advanced' (abstract) enough for Alloway to include him. The status of these artists altered between 1955 and 1958 and it was somewhat a consequence of the presence of Abstract Expressionism in Europe and in Britain.

Except for Davie and Scott, who had previous opportunities to have seen Abstract Expressionist paintings, they were all able to see the new American painting in reasonable number and quality only at the Tate 1956 exhibition.⁶ Most of the relevant changes in their painting happened thereafter. While it is impossible to determine exactly to what extent the individual artists were influenced by Abstract Expressionism, to examine in some detail those painters and their works in the second half of the fifties would help to understand the effects of Abstract Expressionism. The artists to be discussed include Davie, Heron, Scott, Lanyon and Frost. Davie and Heron had changed their position in the avant garde hierarchy dramatically as a result of their swift changes in response to the impact of Abstract Expressionism which was reinforced by the similar trend in France, the Art Informale. On the other hand, Scott, Frost and Lanyon were basically not disrupted by the invasion of Abstract Expressionism and stayed on their course while from time to time they showed in their painting an awareness of it.

It should be emphasised that the Middle Generation painters in common had gained, to a different extent, their relative maturity before their encounter with Abstract Expressionism (except for Davie, probably). In general they took on Abstract Expressionist painting with a defined purpose. They did not imitate technically Abstract Expressionist painting, even if it sometimes appeared so. They were also alert and reluctant to be drawn too close to Abstract Expressionists and were able to maintain a critical attitude. On all occasions when they were in

danger of being overshadowed by Abstract Expressionism they stressed their roots in the tradition of European painting.

Heron was a prominent figure both championing and criticising Abstract Expressionism in Britain. The son of a textile merchant who had connections with painters, Heron began to draw and paint from childhood. As early as 1934 when he was only 14 years old, Heron was able to appreciate Cézanne and Matisse. Heron remained a self-taught artist, despite his part time study in the Slade School of Fine Art which he began in 1937 (but he did not finish). It was, however, during the Slade School years that Roger Fry's writings on Cézanne and Matisse were introduced to him which subsequently proved to be a profound influence on him as both a painter and critic. Heron was 'electrified' by the paintings of Braque and Picasso exhibited at Rosenberg & Helftin in late 1939. He was also deeply affected by Matisse's *Red Studio* of 1911 when the painting was hung on the wall at the Redfern Gallery during the nine months between 1943 and 1944; Heron went to the painting almost every Saturday. This picture was, according to Heron, the most important single influence he ever had in his entire career as a painter. Matisse, Picasso and Braque, all the three had large exhibitions in London immediately after the war, had a renewed impact on him.⁷

In addition to these primary sources of inspiration and influence Heron's experience with design - as assistant at the Bernard Leach Pottery in St Ives during the war and as chief designer in his father's firm after the war - was beneficial to his painting, the former gave him the sense of proportion and space and the latter taught him the usage of decorative colour.

Between 1947 and 1955, Heron's painting was in a discernible personal style in the vein of late Braque, except for a few abstract paintings in 1952 when he experimented briefly with abstract painting

under the influence of de Staël. Although Heron had been an admirer of Braque for some time, he did not follow Braque closely until he saw the large Braque exhibition at the Tate in 1945. His interest in Braque was reinforced by his subsequent visit to Braque's studio in Paris in 1949. What Heron had learned from Braque, as shown in paintings like *The Studio Stair* 1952-1953 (Fig. 4), was the method to compose a painting in which the normal pictorial definition of space was disrupted. Most of these paintings incorporated objects or figures indoor with outdoor scenes of harbour or landscape. Lines with variation in width and speed, drawn in charcoal, formulated grids which were filled with colour.⁸ Because his lines were surrounded on many occasions by blank canvas they form on their own an independent motif of painting. The application of colour was in a way regardless of spatial order in the real world. The theme of these paintings was the interactive relations between colour (substance) and space (illusion).

It is obvious that, so far, Heron was not particularly radical compared with his fellow Middle Generation painters and the constructivists in London; he was not included in the *Nine Abstract Artists* in 1954 may be such an indication. The one year from June 1955 to June 1956 was crucial for Heron. Heron had greatly reduced the amount of his writing after the publication of *The Changing Forms of Art* and committed himself more to painting;⁹ he had met the increasingly influential American critic Clement Greenberg (although his rising status was unknown to Heron at the time) and discussed with him Abstract Expressionist painting at some length;¹⁰ he also saw Mark Tobey's retrospective at the ICA and *Modern Art from the United States* exhibition at the Tate; he became the London correspondent for *Arts* in New York; a series of events culminated by his decision to move out of London to Eagle's Nest at Zennor, Cornwall.¹¹

Heron had already seen a few paintings by two Abstract Expressionists, Pollock and Sam Francis, in 1953 at the ICA and he then criticised them for 'lack of spatial structure or architectonic qualities.'¹² Both the Tobey retrospective at the ICA in 1955 and *Modern Art from the United States* at the Tate Gallery in 1956 brought to Britain Abstract Expressionist paintings, in good number. Endorsed by the similar European trend - Art Informale, Abstract Expressionist painting became the most important stimulus, strong enough to liberate Heron from the near captivity of Braque. During the subsequent few years between 1956 and 1959, Heron's painting was in a continuity of dramatic changes: he started with tachist painting and, shortly after, he replaced these with the so called stripe paintings; the stripe painting was again abandoned in favour of the soft-edged square painting - a formula developed steadily thereafter. The string of radical shifts in direction caused controversy yet Heron significantly improved his position within the ranks of avant garde artists.

Symptoms of change, the tachist elements, were detectable in a few paintings he had completed in London in May 1955, prior to his favourable review of Tobey's retrospective exhibition in the ICA. The series of radical changes accelerated in 1956 at Zennor however. The first result was the tachist paintings inspired by flowering shrubs in his garden - the titles of these paintings, such as *Garden Painting* August 1956, were revealing. Indeed the shapes of flowers were still vaguely recognisable in these paintings. They were all-over compositions of entirely brush-strokes of very liquid paint dribbling all the time down the canvases, or better perhaps, of mottled patches of glowing colour. These experiments were immediately linked with paintings by Sam Francis,¹³ because Heron's paintings had the similar feast of liquid and melodious colours as Francis'. The latter was one of the earliest American painters exposed in Britain (in the ICA in 1953) and was much in

demand in Paris where he lived. An indication of the degree of his popularity was that the critic Basil Taylor mistakenly honoured him as a 'founder of American non-figurative art' in his review of *Modern Art from the United States* in 1956. The appearance of some works by the two were very similar so that physical descriptions of some Francis paintings could readily be applied to Heron's garden paintings without major alterations. What made the difference was that the underlying structures in Heron's garden paintings were still there while, in paintings by Francis, even a hint of structure was deliberately erased.

Like paintings in *Objective Abstraction* of the thirties, Heron's garden paintings appeared lacking a context, neither that of his own stylistic evolution, nor that of a broad historical necessity. This may partially explain why the garden painting turned soon into a new kind of composition, vertical stripe painting, which seemed even more radical. The new paintings painted in early 1957 were received badly at the time.¹⁴ The change seemed so absurd as Alan Bowness recalled in 1968:

I can think of few more disconcerting pictures seen in England in the last 20 years than Patrick Heron's striped paintings of 1957....¹⁵

Nevertheless it was a logical development from the garden paintings. The vertical stripe paintings, which came before the more subtle horizontal stripe painting, evolved from the garden paintings like *Black and White Vertical I* April 1956. They use the same formula as the garden painting but the shapes of strokes were stretched longer. Ultimately '(the) strokes, or touches, increasingly assumed a vertical direction so that each canvas, in the end, consisted solely of large isolated vertical brushstrokes.'¹⁶

The vertical colour stripes were the sole images of painting, as for example in a typical work of this kind, *Vertical Light* March 1957 (Fig. 6). The background consisted of areas of different width and in

light colours, upon which dark and slim vertical stripes were erected boldly and freely. The strokes were decisive and definite - they could only result from a once only action of the artist's arm and could not be revised. The physical appearances of the stripes, sometimes dry and rigid and sometimes floating, resulted from the speed of the painter's action, the sizes of brushes and the amount of paint the brushes contained.

The stripe paintings were related to gestural Abstract Expressionist painting by Heron himself as he explained them somewhat using concepts of action or gesture:

In early 1957, feeling I think that the all-over emphasis and uniform loosedness and the too-mechanical scribbles of...tachisme and...action painting needed to be harnessed slightly more rigidly again to the edges of the canvas, I allowed my arm to extend a number of these canvas.... It was therefore a natural step...to proceed from this to canvases whose sole image consisted solely of these long vertical strokes...all reaching more or less from top to bottom of the picture format.¹⁷

The 'too-mechanical scribbles of...action painting' possibly refers to Pollock's *Number 1A* 1949 (Fig. 1), exhibited in *Modern Art from the United States* in the Tate Gallery in 1956, in which the area adjacent to the top edge of the canvas was left blank. The edges of the painting were, according to Heron, deserted by Pollock. Heron consciously extended his arm as far as the very edges of painting thus his canvases were tailored to a proportion and size which best suited his purpose. As most of the canvases measures around 20" x 40" Heron's brushes could travel across the two longer edges without disruption of any kind and therefore leave the stripes greatest strength and energy. Heron's gesture in painting was very different from those of Pollock. Heron was never 'in' painting in the sense as Pollock did because his paintings were on a smaller scale and he saw it a necessity to retain the control of his

hands - for him the virtue of painting - while allowed decisions being made spontaneously.

Heron's horizontal stripe paintings which overlapping in time with the vertical stripe paintings, do not merit the name stripe painting as they are composed of wider bands running into each other. These paintings achieved a high level of colour nuance and interaction. Heron stated his primary interest in painting in 1958 when he was producing them:

...., the reason why the stripes sufficed, as the formal vehicle is the colour, was precisely that they were so very uncomplicated as shapes. I realised that the emptier the general format was, the more exclusive the concentration upon the experience of colour itself. With stripes one was free to deal only with the interaction between varying quantities of varied colours, measured as expenses or areas. One was unconsciously resisting, perhaps, being side-tracked at that stage by the more complex interactions which are set up along the frontiers of colour-areas when those frontiers are themselves more complex in character than the relatively straight lines which separated the bands or stripes in my 1957 paintings.¹⁸

Heron achieved the best results in paintings like *Red Layers with blue and Yellow* December 1957 (Fig. 8) and *Incandescent Skies, Yellow and Rose* December 1957.

Though Heron was not, and never has been a landscape painter, as most other St Ives painters were, he was aligned with them at the time as he too drew much inspiration from the surrounding landscape. Heron attempted in many of his stripe paintings, both vertical and horizontal paintings, to evoke the colours of natural light with a 'pictorial scheme.'¹⁹ The titles Heron gave to his paintings during the period may be indicative, *Vertical Light* March 1957, *Red Horizon* March 1957, *Blue Horizon* March 1957 and *Incandescent Skies* December 1957, to name a few. Nevertheless these stripe paintings are 'not species of suppressed

representation.'²⁰ When Heron became suspicious in the summer of 1958 that his horizontal stripe painting may have borne a slight resemblance to sunset over the sea (*Red Layers with Blue and Yellow* December 1957), he stopped painting them.²¹

Heron had already incorporated colour patches in a few stripe paintings in 1957, in *Scarlet Verticals* March 1957 and *Red Horizon* May 1957 (Fig. 9), for example. From these few paintings, his soft edged square paintings evolved when he complicated the simple composition of stripe painting by inserting square and rectangular colour patches. At the same time he did not sacrifice the high level of directness and vitality he had achieved in his stripe paintings.

It was the appearance of horizontal stripe paintings and especially those experimental, with colour patches, that prompted a speculation by the American critic Hilton Kramer, who visited Heron at his studio at Zennor in 1958 and saw all the stripe paintings Heron had finished or was still working on. Kramer immediately related them to Rothko's painting as he saw those painting as 'sensitive, intelligent variation on the work of Mark Rothko.'²² Kramer's assertion was based on the overt formal similarity between Heron's paintings and those of Rothko's in 1948-49.²³ Heron's *Red Ground* May 1957 and *Yellow and Violet Squares in Red* February 1958 (Fig. 10) can be visually easily linked with Rothko's *Number 19* 1948 (Fig. 12). Heron himself admitted such formal resemblance although he denied explicitly he was 'after' Rothko:

As luck would have it, an early Rothko (in the Power Collection at the ICA in same month) was rather like those paintings of mine which accompanied the stripe paintings, and which had soft-edged squares in them, as well as stripes. The closeness to the early Rothko was obvious - Yet I only set eyes for the very first time on such a Rothko - as did every one else on this side of the Atlantic, at that show, i.e., after my own stripe painting exhibition was in mid-career.²⁴

Both artists' paintings in question were transitional in their respective developments. While Rothko was changing from his more complicated Surrealist biomorphic painting to his simpler and emptier colour field painting, Heron was in the process to recomplicate paintings. Both used similar shapes as formal units but the patches, squares or circles, served just as formal units for Heron while Rothko abstracted his shapes from sacred pictures of in the past and attempted to convey the religious and mystical meaning of his sources.²⁵ The similar shapes used by the two artists could not be more different in interpretation.

Heron's transitory session led to his full developed formula of soft edged square painting, as exemplified by *Yellow Painting*, between 1958 and early 1959. The composition of the paintings became complicated as the patches increased in quantity and in shapes - there are soft edged squares, rectangles and lip-sided circles. In the meantime the paintings were illusionary as the patches in different shapes created movement in and out of depth - they hovered at different intervals and coming forward or sinking backward. Heron also attempted to achieve a richer, deeper resonance and great density by using thick and opaque paint.

What Heron was doing during the few years was, in fact, to restore basic values of painting, but in a post-Abstract Expressionist context; Heron certainly saw his own painting in such a historical context. Heron's paintings in the period were all about the relationship between colour and space and authenticity of composition. Heron gave obvious priority to the former and experimented very boldly with different colour combinations and spatial movement of colours. Heron emphasised:

It is obvious that colour is now the only direction in which painting can travel. Painting has still a continent left to explore, in direction of colour (and in no other direction)....²⁶

The bulk of Abstract Expressionist paintings and the paintings under its influence were black and white in character and Heron saw an urgency to reintroduce colour into abstract painting. To Heron contemporary painting needed to discover the 'enjoyment of the superbly exciting facts of the world of colour.'²⁷ For him the contribution to the knowledge of colour by Monet, Matisse and Bonnard could not be overemphasised, as he discussed them again and again in a number of articles during this period and exploited actively the legacy in colour left by them.²⁸

Heron's paintings in this period, such as *Squares in Deep Cadmium* January 1958 and *Brown Ground* August 1958-July 1959, were again linked with Rothko with regard to the similarities between their use of dim, resonant colours. Rothko was well-known for his poignant and evocative power of colour. Heron had produced some paintings between 1959 and 1961 in which value contrast was reduced to a large extent and colour shade was blurred and ambiguous. The surface of painting was brushed with thin turpentine so that colour sucked fully into the canvas. Heron was in this respect closer to Scott rather than Rothko, as Alan Gouk had pointed out.²⁹ Scott was a master of such technique and the two were very close at the time. It has to be noticed that even at this point Heron applies paint more directly with 'firmness' and 'the sense of paint as paint, tangible substance' - the qualities of painting he recognised in Matisse - than Rothko did. The latter's application of colour was gentler and in a more concealing manner.³⁰ Heron never felt comfortable with the technique and abandoned it shortly after.

Heron's other concern at the time was about composition. Although Heron experimented with pictorial themes, such as ambiguity of a shape as figure or ground, pull and push of picture planes and so on, his real concentration was on the positive and creative uses of corners and edges of canvases:

... something first happened which I see has gone on happening, at intervals, ever since: namely, the sweeping or sucking to one side of the canvas of all the individual formal units so that they end up clustered along, or piled against, the right-hand edge, leaving three-quarters of the picture area empty of incident. *Black Painting - Red, Brown, Olive: July 1959* is one of the first instances of this - that is, of the orientation of all the separately recognisable elements towards the right-hand edge of the canvas.³¹

Although it looked as if Heron reached incidentally such a realisation he developed from it a programme to retain formal complicity and intelligence in painting as against the ideas of Abstract Expressionism. Heron has emphasised the significance of edges of canvas in relation to Abstract Expressionist painting on quite a few occasions.³² The creative use of edges of canvas by himself and some other Middle Generation painters, according to Heron, not only distinguished them from Abstract Expressionists but also influenced subsequently a few Abstract Expressionists (Gottlieb and de Kooning) and the newer New York painters (Jules Olitski and Morris Louis, etc.).

When Abstract Expressionism was at its zenith in the late fifties and sixties the discussion of Heron's painting made consistent reference to it. Abstract Expressionism alone can not explain what happened in Heron's paintings between 1955 and 1959. In fact Heron's painting of the time had much wider references. There were several concurrent influences on him. De Staël, for instance, renewed his inspiration to Heron when Whitechapel Gallery staged his retrospective in 1956 (in 1952 Heron was once influenced by de Staël's *Les Roits* 1952, in his first London exhibition at the Mathiessen's gallery that year).

Heron also referred to Monet, Matisse, Braque and Picasso frequently during the period and looked especially hard at Bonnard. One of Heron's major concern in painting at the time, the importance of the four edges of painting as we discussed before, was from the argument he

left in an unpublished essay he wrote for *Horizon* in 1947, in which he analysed the innovative use of the four edges of canvas by Bonnard. According to Heron, Bonnard realised for the first time a centreless composition in illustrative painting by arranging all objects on a canvas as of equal importance. Heron was excited with the 'fish net' effect he found in Bonnard's painting. He commented that:

... the fish net may emphasise is the apparently unending all-over nature of Bonnard's design. There is an extraordinarily wide distortion of accent and pictorial stress. Right into the corners of the canvas we follow a display, a layout, in which interest is as intense half an inch from the picture's edge as it is at the centre.³³

This property in Bonnard's painting was well on Heron's agenda when he was considering to recomplicate his canvas in 1958.³⁴ Complicated asymmetric composition, one of the major achievements by the Middle Generation painters, was in fact credited to Bonnard by Heron.

It was presumed that two English painters, Matthew Smith and Ivon Hitchens, especially the latter, also had substantial influence on Heron during the period.³⁵ Both were antecedents in conveying sensory experiences in landscape as a condensed colour orchestra. In Heron's essays in *The Changing Forms of Art*, Smith was described as a painter able to use at once scientific accuracy and exciting emotional effect. And in the same book Heron praised Hitchens' painting as that 'the three-dimensional imagery of actual landscape goes hand in hand with a brilliant surface organisation.'³⁶ In Hitchens' paintings nature was compressed just as a few sensuous, subtle yet bold brush works. They were obviously more attractive to Heron in the fifties as they were fluid, intense and vivid in execution while taut and highly controlled in structure - Heron was to a large extent to achieve the same effects in painting. Although Heron did not try usually to compress landscape into

painting in a way Hitchens did, his stripe paintings, especially those horizontal stripe paintings were executed in a very similar manner.

Abstract Expressionists, as well as these French and British artists, influenced Heron concurrently. It is worth arguing that Abstract Expressionism was directly responsible for the dramatic changes themselves, but perhaps not for the resulting styles. Abstract Expressionism helped to pull him out from the Braquisque convention he had been in for some years. And to be more specific it was the gestural Abstract Expressionist paintings of Sam Francis, Tobey's paintings in his exhibition in ICA and the Pollocks in *Modern Art from the United States* at the Tate Gallery in 1956, rather than Rothko's painting, which did this, as one can determine from his early response in his garden paintings and stripe paintings, as well as in the terms he used in his initial verbal response, such as 'size,' 'energy,' 'inventive daring.'³⁷

Furthermore, the influences of Abstract Expressionism on Heron should be measured by the extent to which it changed the course of his development as a painter. Stylistic similarities with particular Abstract Expressionists were often not as significant as presumed. The comparison between Heron's paintings of 1955-1956 and paintings by Francis, and between Heron's paintings of 1958-1960 and paintings by Rothko, because of the closeness between the appearances of these paintings, was irrelevant and sometimes even misleading.

Heron was probably the least advanced or radical amongst his fellow Middle Generation painters (of course not the least mature) before 1955. A few years after, he became probably the most radical painter in his generation. He was naturally included in *Statement, a Review of abstract art* in 1956, *Metavisual, Tachisme, Abstract* in 1957 and *Abstract Impressionism* in 1958 and after 1962 his painting could readily fit into those by next generation painters who were the major players of the sixties.

Alan Davie, an artist from Scotland, held a unique position in post-war abstract painting in Britain. He was independent of the two tendencies of post-war abstraction as identified by Alloway in 1954 - the constructivists and the Middle Generation abstract painters - with the both, he had contacts. Davie was able to retain independence because of two factors: he was probably the only major post-war abstract painter with an interest in Surrealist automatism, though briefly, and he was the first artist in the beginning of the fifties working in a fashion associated with gestural Abstract Expressionism, well ahead of those who followed the trend after the middle fifties. Davie's relation with Abstract Expressionism was, to some extent, similar to that of Heron but he encountered the Americans much earlier in date and in stages of his development.

Abstract Expressionism was an influence that changed Davie's normal pace or rhythm of development, in the same way that it affected Heron. Therefore, Davie was able to leap, in his very early days, from a relatively conservative and conventional stance to an advantageous position in the post-war art scene. Davie began to paint at the age of 16 and soon, like many of his contemporaries who took an interest in art, became an admirer of Degas, Van Gogh and Cézanne. With some knowledge about these masters Davie entered Edinburgh College of Art in 1937. His interest in these artists was affirmed at the college, mainly by his teacher John Maxwell who also introduced him to the paintings of Chagall. Davie's remaining early works, a small number of still-lives, landscapes with still-life, townscapes and portraits reflect this. *Still Life with Vase* 1945 assimilated Van Gogh's explicitly, in the use of colour and brushes. *Landscape with Window Ledge and Flowers* 1946 and *Women Arranging Flowers* 1945 were clearly under the influence of Chagall. In some of his other paintings slightly later, there were hints that Davie was drawn to

Klee and Picasso after he saw their paintings in their large exhibitions in London after the war. Davie's response to Klee was immediate, as shown in a painting of the same year, *Landscape with Bridge* 1945. He did not respond to Picasso as explicitly as he did to Klee; his *The Saint* 1948, done just before his travel to the continent, showed only an awareness of recent Picassos. Davie's painting so far was under strong French influence, with increasingly visible interests in abstraction, as a result of his exposure to Klee, but he was still, by a large measure, a traditional painter.

On April 5, 1948 Davie left Edinburgh to undertake a long overdue trip to the Continent - he had won a travelling scholarship at the Edinburgh College of Art in 1945 that he could not use because of the war. Davie and his wife spent a week in London first and then set off to Paris. They stayed in Paris for six weeks where the city scene was fascinating while the contemporary art scene was, to Davie, apparently dull and disappointing. Davie seemed not aware of the post-war new development represented by Soulage, Wols among others, because there were hardly any of their works in galleries in Paris. Davie arrived in Milan via Switzerland on June 10 and 5 days later in Venice where he saw the 1948 Biennale. Davie explored further in Italy and returned to Venice for his one-man exhibition at Galleria Sardri in late November. Peggy Guggenheim went to see the exhibition and bought one of Davie's paintings, *Music of the Autumn Landscape* of 1948. Later she recommended Davie to Gimpel brothers in London and it provided an important boost in Davie's career.

More significantly, Peggy Guggenheim also allowed him access to her contemporary American painting collection, introduced him to some recent American paintings. This was a important complement to the wide range of European art traditions and cultures he experienced during his trip: the early Christian mosaic; the artistic achievement of Romanesque

buildings; and the surrealists Klee, Ernst and Arp.³⁸ Guggenheim's collection of contemporary American painting contained works by Rothko, Motherwell, Pollock and some others. It had then the most comprehensive collection of Pollock's painting. Strongly represented were his symbolic surrealist paintings of early 1940s, including paintings such as *Two and Circumcision*, both of 1945, *Greyness* 1943 although Pollock's recent paintings were also well represented, for instance, by *Enchanted Forest* 1947 (one of the first drip paintings) which Davie had possibly seen during his stay there.

Davie was regarded the first painter in Britain, probably in Europe to have realised the vitality of Abstract Expressionism.³⁹ Although recent studies on Davie's journal, which covered most places and events he came upon during his travel, found no mention at all of the American paintings in the Guggenheim collection.⁴⁰ What was clear was that, between the Winter of 1948, when he returned from the European continent, and 1957, Davie produced paintings that were analogous to Pollock's paintings between 1940 and 1946. Davie's interest in and exploitation of mythology resembled that of Pollock's. The titles Davie gave to his paintings during this period, like *Blood Creation* 1952, *Woman Bewitched by the Moon* 1956 (a series of five) and *Creation of Man* 1957, had a correspondence to those Pollock's, *She Wolf* 1938, *Guardians of the Secret* 1943 and *The Moon Women Cuts the Circle* 1943; although in both cases the titles were not necessarily relevant to the contents in paintings as, Davie and Pollock had the habit to give their painting names only at a later date.

Davie also applied a number of techniques of painting which seemed to have their origin in Pollock's painting. Davie, like Pollock, left canvases un-stretched on the floor of the studio while painting so that he could paint from different directions.⁴¹ In the meantime, working rapidly on canvas on the floor, with thin paint, meant that a certain

amount of paint splashes, from time to time, on the picture either by accident or by deliberate 'accident.' Davie also walked over it from time to time at the calling of his intuition, leaving behind footprints.

It was then that Davie resumed the exercise of preparing his own paint - a thin consistency by mixing powder pigments with oil and turpentine - which somehow served as a equivalent for Pollock's commercial decorative paint.⁴² The purpose was to make the paint suitable for fluent and speedy brushwork that was visually more arousing. Inevitably the appearance of the finished work has a similar appearance to the Pollocks painted before his invention of the 'drip' paintings.

Davie often reworked on a painting, or any parts of it, as long as he felt the need. At times he might just destroy and obliterate the image in order to revive the life of the canvas and he often achieved surprising results.

Furthermore Davie's paintings were black-and-white paintings in character. The painters Davie had admired since his early years in Edinburgh College of Art were all masters of expressionistic colour and Davie's early painting, *Window with Flowers* 1943 for example, showed how he had been fascinated with colour combination and various techniques to achieve resonance and richness of colour. During the period in question his painting suddenly became monochromatic. If his works of the fifties were assembled together they could give a compelling impression of monochrome, distinct from either the few surviving early works of the forties or the bright paintings of the sixties onwards. His paintings of the fifties are generally dark, sombre and sometimes earthy. Davie's total indifference with colour was shown in *Footprint Image* 1952 (Fig 14), for example, one of the earliest of the kind. His sense of colour was regained only after 1957 when he began to fill large areas of canvas with bright colours. The monochrome character of his painting during this period was reminiscent of paintings by the Americans he saw in Venice -

not only Pollock, but also Kline and Motherwell - all the three were strong in black-and-white painting.

In the mid-fifties *Modern Art from the United States* caused a positive response from his peer painters. It was also a renewed stimulus to Davie. The few huge and heroic canvases, *The Creation of Man* (Fig. 15) and *The Creation of Eve* (fig. 16), both of 1957, among others, were his fresh response to that stimulus. From the very beginning when he set his eyes on Pollock's painting, Davie was clear that Pollock's drip technique had its limits - it was as much a liberation as a limitation - one cannot go any further. While he saw Pollocks' early paintings as well as the drip paintings in Guggenheim's collection, he was obviously attracted to the former. The few large paintings indicated a change. These paintings were composed of ever expanding and somewhat uneasy interlacing trails of marks growing upwards from the bottom, or literally from anywhere on the canvases. The endlessly twisted linear marks, with intervals, were chaotic but never beyond the control of the artist. The two paintings, especially the way they were composed and their growing process, were reminiscent of some Pollock's huge drip paintings like *Number 1A 1948* (fig. 1) rather than Pollock's early works which Davie originally looked at.

Nevertheless Davie preferred the combination of linear elements and flat areas of colour, as exemplified in Pollock's surrealist painting of the early 1940s or, back further, in Picasso's paintings in the 1930s. The chaotic linear brushwork in *The Creation of Man* became a device, preserved at a much reduced scale, in many of his later paintings. In *Discovery of the Chariot* 1958 for example, compressed units of twinkling linear marks and dots, break through the calmer squares and circle shapes and generate tension.

What the Americans had done to Davie was, similar to Heron's experience, they freed him from a rather conventional approach to

pictorial art, and opened up certain possibilities for him. The examples of Pollock's early paintings of the forties, which were different significantly from European contemporary paintings, must have encouraged or endorsed Davie's intrinsic love of fantasy, myth, magic - things with extraordinary, exotic, enchanting qualities.⁴³

Zen was an important element in Davie's painting after 1955 when, by accident, he acquired Eugen Herrigel's book *Zen and Art of Archery*. His immediate appreciation of Zen thought and the quick adaptation to his painting practice was not by accident. On the one hand it was prepared by the preceding years, when he painted in a liberated mode, and, on the other, Davie practically needed to define his painting in a different set of terms when he was linked with Pollock frequently by critics. With Zen he could work out a solution effortlessly. In the introduction to Herrigel's book, Daisetz T. Suzuki, the Zen master and scholar, asserted:

One of the most significant features we noticed in the practice of archery, and in fact of all the arts ..., is that they are not intended for utilitarian purpose only or for purely aesthetic enjoyment, but are meant to train the mind....

If one really wishes to be master of an art, technical knowledge of it is not enough. One has to transcend technique so that the art became an 'artless' growing art of the unconscious.⁴⁴

Davie took on the statement so that he could input his painting with an appropriate layer of intelligence:

Sometimes I think I paint simply to find enlightenment and revelation. I do not practise painting as an Art; and the Zen Buddhist likewise does not practise archery as an exercise of skill but as a means to enlightenment. The right Art is purposeless, aimless. The more obstinately one tries to learn how to paint for the sake of producing a work of Art, the less one will succeed.⁴⁵

The current state of Davie's painting, which was reached incidentally through Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism, was already in line with such Zen demands, such as the regaining of beginner-mind, limitless, empty, the greatest economy of expression, free of the habits of the expert, etc. It was significant that formal units in Davie's painting were simple enough to validate the Zen ideas that the deeper or unconscious mind needed repeating, ostensibly irrational logic and poetry.

Davie also united all his activities involving creativity under the principle of Zen. The preparation of paints from pigments had, as he announced later in 1956, dual functions: one was nothing more than to make the paint suitable for his painting and the other was as a necessary rite-some pre-painting meditation. Playing the piano and jazz instruments before painting also helped to cultivate the right mood exploiting accidentals during painting.

After 1957 an increasing emphasis on magic in Davie's painting meant he had hit upon a new agenda in his painting, more characteristic and decorative, and sometimes exotic. Davie's encounter with Abstract Expressionism happened in his early career and, as a result, the change of course of his development was not as violent as in the case of Heron. Nevertheless it, too, significantly improved Davie's stance within the avant-garde art hierarchy in Britain, while Davie surprisingly remained independent of any other concurrent and later trends in painting.

The painters to be discussed next, Peter Lanyon, William Scott and Terry Frost (the list should also include quite a few other names, for example Roger Hilton), had a different type of connection with Abstract Expressionist painting. Unlike Heron and Davie, they did not change their current styles and persuasions dramatically but only showed in their works an awareness of the contemporary sentiment in abstract painting

that was largely affected, if not formulated, by the upsurge of Abstract Expressionism and the critical acclaim for it.

Peter Lanyon was a native of St Ives and two years senior to Patrick Heron, with whom Lanyon also attended the same school. When Lanyon grew up he enrolled at the Penzance Art School for eighteen months, four of which he spent at the Euston Road School in London - taking advice from the critic and painter Adrian Stokes. At Euston Road School he took lessons from Victor Pasmore and Goldstream, both of whom worked in a realistic style with emphasis on scientific precision. When Nicholson and Hepworth settled at St Ives he was introduced to them, again by Stokes. Nicholson gave him a couple of sessions a week, to try out construction and drawing from settings of various objects. These exercises eased Lanyon's frustration caused by his allegiance to landscape and showed him a new way of translating his feeling of landscape. After Gabo joined the Nicholsons at St Ives in late 1939, Lanyon developed an even closer relationship with him. Lanyon's association with Gabo was eminently beneficial to his exploration in describing and defining space and movement in constructivist terms. More importantly Gabo's constructivism was grounded in a belief in artistic autonomy but with a strong ethical commitment. For Gabo construction was basically to create images, which embody the dynamism of modern life, through the operation of intuitive insight. It was an ideological necessity that required form and content to be united.⁴⁶ Lanyon felt a close sympathy in Gabo's art for precisely that he himself was a man with a great sense of humanity - once Lanyon seriously thought to give himself to the cause of anti-Franco in Spain and showed sincere concern with the South African War. Lanyon broke with Nicholson subsequently because of their moral and aesthetic differences.

The formal elements of frontal, post-cubist stacked planes in Lanyon's early abstract paintings were initiated from his early

constructive practices. In his early constructions the impurities Lanyon developed later in his painting after the war could be found. It was in these early works that Lanyon showed a desire to combine a thorough study of the subject of his painting and a directness in execution.

This commitment to both intuition and informedness featured Lanyon's multi-focus landscape paintings in the early fifties. *Porthleven* 1951, one of the earliest of the kind, illustrated his complicated process of painting.⁴⁷ As exposed in his retrospective at Whitworth Gallery in 1978, twelve highly condensed and increasingly linear structural drawings and a gouache colour-sketch, together with five constructions, were his studies for the first state of *Porthleven*. Construction was used by Lanyon in the same way that other artists use drawing as a thought process, to try out ideas. By changing to another medium, Lanyon was to a large extent recreating instead of transferring simply what one might get in drawings. Lanyon insisted on 'the primary importance of knowing before making' and at the same time he painted intuitively.⁴⁸ It was significant that his intuition was set to work on a vast store of information recording his relationship with the local environment. This was a rather unique solution and differs from various sorts of compromises practised by many artists - simply combining abstract symbols with a captured vision of objects. Lanyon pioneered the practice of his fellow St. Ives artists to 'record' one's experience in landscape, in nature.

St Just 1951 (Fig. 17) was of central importance in his paintings of the early 1950's. It was a 'grand statement of the artist's experience of the place.'⁴⁹ In the painting Lanyon successfully presented landscape from an un-conventional perspective. He did not describe in *St Just* exactly the scene in reality, but, the formal characteristics of the painting evoke the feeling one may get from the particular place which inspired it. Lanyon achieved this mainly through his handling of texture

of the painting. It was often deliberately churned or aggressively knifed in order to evoke lush grass and granite. By the way, it was the treatment of the texture of painting that had a look similar to that of de Kooning's, so that, when Scott came back from North America in 1953 he mused that Lanyon was already de Kooning without knowing him.⁵⁰

On the other hand, *St Just* was a religious painting, not only because it was the centrepiece of a triptych, but also it had the fullest 'Christian and humanitarian' concerns:

Many people in *St Just* lost their lives in mine disasters, so the mineshaft in the middle becomes a cross, and the barbed wire around the disused mines a crown of thorns. For me this picture is also a crucifixion, and I painted two tall pictures to go on either side. They were landscapes but they were also mourners on either side of the cross.⁵¹

Among his fellow painters at St Ives only Lanyon, it seems, paid much attention to subject matter and it was in this sense that he was closer to Abstract Expressionists than many of his contemporaries.

The style established in *St Just* was sustained over the next few years until 1954. In 1953 Lanyon revisited Italy (where he was stationed at the end of the war) for three months and the trip provided him with enormous stimulus. While Lanyon continued producing paintings inspired by both Cornish and Italian landscape (*Moor Cliff*, *Kynance* 1954 and *Saracinesco* 1954) he did a few mythological paintings (*Europa* 1954). This warm and sometime mythical style came to an end in 1956 or 1957.

In January 1957, Lanyon visited New York for the first time, where he had his first one man show at Catherine Viniano Gallery. Lanyon met many Abstract Expressionists and became friends with Motherwell and Rothko. He admired works by Pollock, de Kooning, Gottlieb, Rothko and Kline among others. In 1959 he visited New York a second time and from then on his visits to the United States became annual events. When

Rothko, together with his wife and child visited St Ives in August 1958, he stayed with Lanyon for about a week. Lanyon tried to help Rothko with looking for a chapel in West Penwith for Rothko to decorate but their search was unsuccessful.

The works of American artists, those of de Kooning in particular, demonstrated a way to animate the surface of a painting. The effect of such a revelation on Lanyon was shown first in paintings like *Silent Coast* 1957, which immediately followed his first visit to New York and was one of the first 'weather paintings.' The painting was executed in a more relaxed style characterised by its 'alloverness,' direct but light treatment of the surface, the whitish and simpler colours, in contrast with the closed forms and with vigorous yet tightly arranged brushstrokes of his previous works. It seemed that Lanyon was in a transition from the heavy and heroic style to a feminine one. The overall impression from the painting was reminiscent of Heron's description of the surprisingly subtle use of pink and female colours by de Kooning.⁵² In addition the gently and evenly brushed colour areas showed that Lanyon was aware of Rothko's techniques.

Lanyon was under a renewed influence from Abstract Expressionist painting in 1959 when he visited New York the second time and *New American Painting* was at the Tate Gallery. There was a further openness in his painting and some typical techniques used by gestural Abstract Expressionists were employed. Dribbles and splashes as well as rapid sweeps of paint appeared in certain paintings including *Long Moor* 1960, *Drift* 1961 and *Loe Bar* 1962 (Fig. 18). Lanyon may in return have influenced de Kooning as the latter turned from figure to landscape during the same period and some of his paintings were extremely similar to those of Lanyon's.

Lanyon took up gliding in 1959 while he went further in his weather painting than when he started with *Silent Coast* 1957. Gliding

provided an unusual combination of sensuous and visual experience and it was an exciting way of knowing the previously unknown and a way of refreshing the known past. Gliding was a great stimulus to Lanyon creativity until his tragic accidental death. Lanyon's art has an unusual continuity under his conviction with landscape - physically experiencing landscape rather than merely observing it - and under a parallel scheme to incorporate such experience into painting.

William Scott, another characteristic artist of the generation, was in many ways in contrast with Patrick Heron, in the context of Abstract Expressionist influence. Scott was born at Green Oak on the Firth of Clyde in Scotland, on 15th February 1913. His mother was a Scot and his father an Irishman. After his family returned to Enniskillen in County Fermanagh, Scott went into the Belfast College of Art. So far, Scott received more training than artistic influence because there were few opportunities in Northern Ireland to see original works of art of any period. Scott came to London in the late summer of 1931 at the age of 18 and entered the Royal Academy Schools. An enormous benefaction to him there was the discipline of copying paintings in the National Gallery. This taught him to love the old masters and gave him a thorough understanding of technique. Like many other Celts, Scott felt difficulty in fitting into the English literary and artistic tradition. His intrinsic rejection of the ambiguity and mysteriousness in English landscape painting meant that he had an unhappy experience with landscape painting. This together with the isolation he felt in London, prompted the idea to go abroad. Scott left England in the autumn of 1937 and travelled in France and Italy for the next two years. He spent the two summers of 1938 and 1939 at Pont Aven, where he and Geoffrey Nelson, a former Slade student, set up the Pont Aven School of Painting. At same time Scott was able to establish a close relationship with some of his French contemporaries and artists older than him.⁵³ He returned home just

before the outbreak of the war; when the war was over he returned to France.

Scott established his personal style in still life painting between 1949 and 1950. The objects in his still life painting were limited to less than a dozen of kitchen wares such as saucepans, pots, bottles, forks, eggs and table top. What interested him in these most common objects of everyday life was primarily their potential use in formal manipulations. At the time Scott did have profound affections for these kitchen wares as well as the grey shades of his painting as he explained: 'I was brought up in a grey world, an austere world: the garden I knew was a cemetery and we had no fine furniture. The objects I painted were the symbols of the life I knew best'.⁵⁴ There were also Surrealist or romantic elements in the form of eroticism in his still life painting between 1949 and 1951, although it was difficult to detect exactly what sources they came from. Nevertheless, Scott was in general practising painting as an abstract painter and those simple shapes of objects allowed him to concentrate on formal experiments. The spatial relationship and order of the circle, square shapes against the plastic emptiness of the background was the matter of interest. John Russell, when explaining his art, gave the following comment:

... the basic subjects of his art remain the same: proportion, the division of space, relations of tone, and management of a small number of recurring forms.⁵⁵

His painting style in 1949 was defined by himself as 'beauty in plainness.' His style was closely related to the unique techniques he had developed over the years.⁵⁶ His finest paintings were painted with thin and dark paint and they had an exceptional tonic richness.

During most of the fifties Scott was under a variety of influences from different countries and times. At first he was, like Heron and some others, impressed by Nicholas de Staël's exhibition at the Mathiessen

Gallery in London in February 1952 and in response he produced some paintings, with bright colour and thick paint applied by palette knife which yields a richness in texture. In 1953 Scott visited New York for the first time. During his two week's stay in New York, Scott had met Pollock, Kline, Rothko and de Kooning among others. Although he was, according to Bowness, shocked by the 'directness,' 'immediacy' and the size of canvas of American painting he did not respond in his painting to the Americans at this stage as he was conscious of his own pictorial traditions:

...there's a whole tradition, the descent from Chardin through Cézanne to Braque and Bonnard, which has no part in their painting, and that's the tradition that I've always held to.⁵⁷

In the mid-fifties (1954-1957) he resumed painting nudes in a manner that the human body was stretched and distorted to a shape similar to the table tops in his still life paintings. These nude paintings were painted under the same compositional methods as that of paintings by Dubuffet and Antony Tapies. At the same time a fusion of influences ranging from the cave paintings of Altamira and Lascaux to paintings by Bonnard, could also be found in these paintings.

Scott started in 1955, whilst he was still concentrating on the nudes, to pick up the thread in his still life in 1950. Soon after Scott expressed his dissatisfaction with his previous still life painting:

For some time I felt very strongly the need to break from my too conventional arrangement in still life painting, a conception of space and which had its roots in the academy of the nineteenth century. I longed for a freedom from the object or perhaps it was now a desire to divide the spaces of my canvas as I felt and not I merely knew - the insistence of object and their symbolic meaning wherever I might place them within the picture plane, interfered with my new interest.⁵⁸

Such expression was in accordance in time with both Abstract Expressionism's high profile in Europe and a renewed influence from de Staël. This concern led in 1957-1958 to a series of new table top paintings. In his previous still life and nude paintings, Scott customised a basic formula: the table top or distorted human body occupied most of the canvas and they were stabilised by table legs and limbs respectively. A new kind of formal arrangement emerged in his 1957-1959 paintings such as *Honeycomb Still Life* 1957, *Gouache Abstraction* 1957, *Orange and Red No. 2* 1957 and *Painting* 1958 (Fig. 20). One of important changes was in the underlying structure of his painting. Though those paintings were not completely non-figurative, the arrangement of objects on the enlarged canvas itself, instead of a tabletop, was completely different from what he did before. This probably came from a desire for the alloverness and the loose structure in various Abstract Expressionist paintings. In the meantime the thick paint and rich texture in these paintings were resulted from his renewed interest in de Staël who had his last exhibition in London in 1956. These new kitchen ware paintings, as a direct consequence of his pure pictorial concern, no longer had symbolic meaning.

The fact that Scott took a commission to paint a huge mural (49' x 9') for Altnagelvin Hospital, Londonderry in 1958 made it difficult to assess the extent of the American influence because the completion of the commission should have given him alternative working experience on large scale. This commission also led his painting to a large degree of abstraction. It must have been an enormous difficulty for Scott to paint such a huge picture from his usual objects - kitchen wares. A reasonable solution was to incorporate more abstract forms. The shapes in the painting were often cut off by the edges of the composition in such a way

as to suggest that the picture was a section of a larger field - a compositional distinction of many Middle Generation painters.⁵⁹

In the 1960s Scott also showed in his paintings that he was well informed of the concurrent trends, including Hard Edge painting and even Pop art. Norbert Lynton observed that there was an affiliation to the colour field and hard-edge painting in, notably, *Berlin Blues* series of 1965 which Scott did during his year in Berlin.⁶⁰ Nevertheless Scott remained the one artist in his generation most reluctant to associate his painting with Abstract Expressionism, as what he pursued in painting in general contrasted with that of the Americans.

Terry Frost was a Middle Generation painter least linked with Abstract Expressionism by British writers so far. His painting was resulted from a combination of strictly disciplined training and an unusual merit in transforming sensory experience by means of abstract forms. Frost attended the St. Ives School of Art in 1947 following the recommendation from Adrian Heath, with whom he was held in the POW camp during the war. He went to the Camberwell School of Art in London from Autumn 1947 until 1950, which proved crucial to his development. The Painting School at the Camberwell was taken over in 1948 by the founder members of the Euston Road School - William Coldstream, as the Head of Painting, together with Claude Rogers, Victor Pasmore and Lawrence Gowing. While the discipline in the life room stressed scientific precision and Frost did attain substantial progress in skills in painting and drawing. He did not appreciate this approach to art however.⁶¹ Victor Pasmore, who was in the process of accomplishing his own stylistic transformation at the time, influenced him profoundly and his attitude to art owed much debt to Pasmore's teaching.⁶² Until 1949 Frost was not yet clear on his position with respect to the two opposing influences he received at the School. On the one hand, he was intrinsically inclined to what Pasmore proposed to him - freedom, courage and ingenuousness in

painting, and, on the other, he followed the disciplines taught by Goldstream closely as he thought it his duty at the school to learn.

Frost painted his first abstract painting, called *Madrigal*, in 1949, under the strong influence of Pasmore who was himself experimenting with ideas he had recently adapted from Klee. The underlying compositional idea of the painting was to mobilise visually geometric shapes by establishing appropriate relationships between them. It was basically an exercise of how forms interact in painting. Frost had done it with a great sense of proportion - an attainment from the strict disciplines at Camberwell that accompanied him all his life as a painter. Special too, in the painting, was the presence of some 'poetic' qualities, derived perhaps from a kind of unique calm in the basic formal units - squares and diagonals - and the dim colours.⁶³

Pasmore had just started to make constructions in early 1950 and when Frost watched him in his studio, he immediately recalled Nicholson's white reliefs and the works of Gabo and other constructivists. At that moment, Frost was 'so excited by all the possibilities' that 'everything suddenly began to open up.'⁶⁴

As soon as he came back to St Ives in late 1950 he started to explore these possibilities by furthering what he achieved in *Madrigal*. Landscape was a compelling subject among artists at St Ives, for both the modernists and the traditionalists. Frost was influenced by Lanyon and he became fascinated with the idea of experiencing landscape. These two were devoted at the time to a kind of time-based approach in two dimensional painting. Frost described how this scheme worked, as in *Blue Movements* 1951:

I had spent a number of evenings looking out over the harbour at St. Ives in Cornwall. Although I had been observing a multiplicity of movement during those evenings, they all evoked a common emotion or mood - a state of delight in front of nature. On one particular blue twilit evening, I was

watching what I can only describe as a synthesis of movement and counter movement. That is to say the rise and fall of the boats, the space drawing of the mastheads, the out blowing off-shore wind - all this plus the predominant feel of blue in the evening and the static brown of the foreshore, generated an emotional state which was to find expression in the painting *Blue Movement*.⁶⁵

Blue Movement was not, Frost continued, a painting to portray the scene or objects in it, rather the 'emotion engendered' by being in that scene. The painting was 'an arrangement of form and colour' evoking a similar feeling derived from that particular piece of nature.⁶⁶ Frost in fact simply accepted the outside world as a source of inspiration and could never predict his own reactions or arrange for their recurrence: either it happened or it did not. The moment of awareness when it occurred provided a stimulus that was essential to his work. Another work revealing Frost's typical method is *Walk Along the Quay* of 1950. In this case the situation became even more complex as the artist added his own movement to the equation, not on a single occasion but on many, for the walk was in fact a daily stroll. There were only formal structures remaining to censor the unpaintable. So the painting was actually a collection of different shapes and tone which gave a hint of what he actually saw, or the visual experiences he enjoyed, during these walks. The key was the dual functions of the shapes, the tones and the hues in painting. A black triangle on canvas can be read as a pure formal element as well as a suggestion of a boat, either a birds-eye or horizontal view. The lines drawn between two of the shapes were clearly associated with the ropes which in reality tethered boats together in the harbour. Meanwhile the water was fragmented as individual water eddies. It was from those paintings Frost's mature style emerged.

Frost had heard of Abstract Expressionist painters from William Scott in 1953. He did not want to see the *Modern Art from the United*

States in the Tate in 1956, although he heard the resulting discussion by his fellow artists at St Ives and Leeds - at this time Frost was in his second year of the Gregory Fellowship at the Leeds University. Frost was well aware of the sensations aroused by Abstract Expressionism and some of its young followers in London. In his letter to Roger Hilton from Leeds in 1957 he was in a very pessimistic mood and complained that he had not been able to draw in American money as some popular young artists did, because he was 'too English a painter.'⁶⁷ Frost might have been abashed by the case of William Green, who had won rapid publicity at the time. Frost did not intend to follow the trend when he was asked by his dealer, as he indicated to Hilton.⁶⁸ Indeed he refused to make phenomenal changes of any kind, although his painting was in a state that could most readily be switched to the current trend. The American influence was, however, detectable in a few of his paintings such as *Painting February* 1958 (Fig. 22) and the series of *Goddess* of the same year, where his compositions were relaxed as a result of a rapid application of paint with wide paint brushes. Those were rare occasions on which his profound sense of proportion did not constrain him.

In 1960 the New York dealer Bertha Schaeffer offered him a one-man show and he had the opportunity to see New York for himself. De Kooning, Rothko, Kline, Newman and Motherwell were present at the opening of the exhibition and later Frost was invited to Newman and Motherwell's studios. Frost was also introduced by Greenberg to two younger American painters, Noland and Olitski who were about to become known in London's avant garde circle. During his three week stay in New York he was most impressed by the general atmosphere there, as he saw how American institutions and corporations used art in their offices and the seriousness of the New York artists themselves and the respect for artists from other sectors of society.

Frost did feel the appeal of the paintings by Motherwell and Tomlin, two American painters who were 'among the most fully steeped in an European tradition and yet whose roots in American soil were deeper than the others.'⁶⁹ Frost was never moved by the splashing and dribbling effects in paintings by Pollock and de Kooning.

Frost was one of the rare artists who was capable of expressing naturally abstract forms from his visual intake from nature. Indeed he barely needed conventions that many his fellow artists relied on. Nor did he need the liberation of Abstract Expressionism or Surrealist automatism which he was never associated with. Having appreciated the world with all his senses he has always been able to invent symbols to do justice to his experience, each time his invention is full of freshness and vitality.⁷⁰

The Middle Generation artists were constantly drawn into connections with Abstract Expressionism. Most of the arguments concentrated on either separating or linking together formal characteristics of paintings by Abstract Expressionists and the Middle Generation artists. Such connections often misled. For instance, the increase in canvas size by the Middle Generation artists in the early fifties came to the attention of many critics. It was not necessarily that they learned from the Americans. In fact, at this time most of the Middle Generation painters had reached their late thirties and they all had attained some success. So that the natural step forward was to increase the size of canvas in order to produce more ambitious works matching their current status, as many painters did in the past. By contrast, it was the younger artists who purposely took over the device of the enlarged canvas from the Americans.

In most of the cases, the Middle Generation artists were not influenced by Abstract Expressionists in style; stylistic influence was not very important. Rather, Abstract Expressionism functioned merely as a

stimulus at different levels for them. At all stages they were cautious in adapting any of the devices developed by Abstract Expressionists. Heron and Davie's examples were revealing. Davie realised very soon that Pollock had reached a dead end by adventuring into his drip painting. Heron had the same point of view soon after 1956 and in 1958 he felt the necessity to recomplicate paintings if contemporary painting had anything to explore further. Both Heron and Davie had successfully regenerated their art by taking on the Americans without following them closely.

The Middle Generation painters were the British counterparts of Abstract Expressionists, like the Art Informale artists were the French ones. They were the major avant garde artists of the fifties as shown by their appropriate roles some important exhibitions, such as *Statement: a Review of British Abstract Art in 1956*, *Metavisual*, *Tachiste*, *Abstract*, as well as *Dimensions - British Abstract Art 1948-1957* and *Abstract Impressionism*, which were in response to the new abstract paintings of America and France. The largest of them, *Metavisual*, *Tachiste Abstract*, organised by Denys Sutton in Redfern Gallery, April 1957 was an ambitious exhibition to show the strength of the British abstract painting which corresponds with the new trend. There were more than one hundred paintings of considerable sizes and more than thirty painters were included. The word 'tachisme' in the title of the exhibition emphasised the European origin of the current trend.

The exhibition *Dimensions - British Abstract Art 1948-1957* held at the O'hana Gallery was the product of Lawrence Alloway who was an increasingly influential figure in the second half of the fifties. The underlying notion of the exhibition was Alloway's Fine/Art Continuum which attempted to redefine abstract art. It was a counter to the *Metavisual*, *Tachiste*, *Abstract* exhibition, for Alloway thought Denys Sutton's selection was overall too aristocratic. *Dimensions* included

exhibitors as divergent in style and persuasion as William Turnbull, Magda Cordell, John McHale, Richard Hamilton, Eduardo Paolozzi.

Abstract Impressionism, organised by Alloway and Harold Cohen for the Arts Council in 1958, was the last occasion on which the Middle Generation as a whole were still seen as mainstream abstract artists, although the younger painters in the exhibition were about to outnumber them, in the British section (the exhibition consisted of American, French and British artists working in a similar mode). After 1958 the critical focal points had completely transferred to the younger generation, those who either engaged in Pop art or new abstract painting or in both. They had taken over the role in avant garde art from the Middle Generation painters and played their part in a very vigorous and aggressive manner. While most Middle Generation painters portrayed themselves to the public as individual artists the young artists often acted collectively, as on the occasions of *Place* and *Situation* - the two earliest and most important showcases of the new British abstract painting.

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- ¹ Quoted in Alan Bowness, 'The American invasion and the British response,' *Studio International*, June 1967.
- ² Lawrence Alloway, Introduction notes in catalogue for *Statement*, a review of abstract art in 1956, Institute of Contemporary Art, 1956.
- ³ Richard Shone, 'The art of Rodrigo Moynihan,' *Rodrigo Moynihan*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1988, p. 25.
- ⁴ Ibid., p. 26.
- ⁵ Lawrence Alloway, Introduction notes in catalogue for *Statement: a review of abstract art in 1956*, Institute of Contemporary Art, 1956.
- ⁶ Alan Bowness, 'The American invasion and the British response,' *Studio International*, June 1967 and Adrian Lewis, 'British avant garde painting 1945-1956, Part I,' *Artscribe*, No. 34, June 1982.
- ⁷ Heron started to write then. His decision to write was partially due to the incomprehension of the British audience to Braque and Georges Rouault, and partially to the influence from Elliot, 'I don't think it would have ever occurred to me to write if it hadn't been for Elliot, I was enormously impressed by his critical writing - hypnotised of course by his poetry. I also thought that if a major poet could write major criticism too, then why (...) couldn't a painter also write major criticism?' as quoted in Vivien Knight's 'Introduction' to her monograph of Patrick Heron.
- ⁸ Patrick Heron, *Tate Gallery Illustrated Catalogue of Acquisitions 1980-1982*, in Vivien Knight ed. *Patrick Heron*, John Taylor, 1988, p. 24
- ⁹ Alan Bowness, 'Introduction,' catalogue for *Paintings by Patrick Heron*, University of Texas at Austin Art Museum, 1978.
- ¹⁰ Patrick Heron, 'The British influence on New York,' Part II, *The Guardian*, 11 Oct. 1974.
- ¹¹ Heron bought the house at Zennor in 1956, moved in the following year. All the stripe paintings were painted there.
- ¹² Patrick Heron, 'Opposing forces,' *New Statesman and Nation*, 21 Feb. 1953.
- ¹³ Lawrence Alloway, 'Introduction,' catalogue for *Statement: a Review of British Abstract Art in 1956*, ICA Gallery, 1956.
- ¹⁴ When these stripe paintings were first shown in public in Redfern Gallery in London in February 1958 the public's responses to them were discouraging and none of them were sold during the exhibition. The gallery manager must have been very disappointed and those paintings were taken down during the mid-run of the show so that the gallery could be

repainted for its next programme. And they were re-hung only during the last week of the show after some friends of Heron's reported to Heron, and whereby this became the last show of Heron's work in the gallery.

15 Alan Bowness, 'On Patrick Heron's striped painting', introduction to the catalogue for Heron's retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, May-June 1968.

16 Patrick Heron, in catalogue for the exhibition *Paintings by Patrick Heron 1965-77*, University of Texas at Austin Art Museum, 1978, pp. 18-19.

17 Ibid.

18 Patrick Heron, 'Two reception rooms', *Architecture & Building*, 1958

19 Brandon Tylar, 'Post-war colour abstract painting in England - the case of Patrick Heron,' *Art History*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1980.

20 Vivien Knight, 'Introduction,' *Patrick Heron*, ed. Vivien Knight, John Taylor, London, 1988. p. 11.

21 One can refer to Heron's own words: 'The large horizontal stripe painting with its swept together blinding of the bands of parallel colour gave rise to a suspicion of a possible figurative, land-and-sea-and-sky reading which very soon led me beyond the format of the pure stripes' - Letter, October 1984, quoted in *St Ives 1939-1963*, Tate Gallery, 1985.

22 Hilton Kramer, 'Patrick Heron's art on view in London,' *The New York Times*, 11 July 1972.

23 Alan Gouk blamed Kramer wrongly because he thought Kramer's assumption was on his observation of the stripe paintings only. Alan Gouk, 'Patrick Heron I,' *Artscribe*, No 34, March 1982, p. 52.

24 Patrick Heron, letter to Vivien Knight, quoted in Alan Gouk's essay, 'Patrick Heron I,' *Artscribe*, No 34, March 1982.

25 Anna C. Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction*, Yale University Press, 1989, p. 162.

26 Patrick Heron, *The Shape of Colour*, The Fifth of Power Lecture in Contemporary Art, 1973. Published in *Studio International*, Feb. 1974.

27 Ibid.

28 For example, in Patrick Heron, 'Monet,' *Arts*, Nov. 1957.

29 Alan Gouk, 'Patrick Heron II,' *Artscribe*, No. 35, June 1982.

30 Peter Fuller, 'The innocent eye,' *Artscribe*, No. 54, Sep./Oct. 1985.

31 The fifth Power Lecture in Contemporary Art, 1973.

32 As in the one well known: 'The British influence on New York,' *The Guardian*, 10, 11, 12, Oct. 1974. A story about the importance of edges of

painting was told by Heron in which he claims he and other Middle Generation painters were the fore-runners in rediscovering in Bonnard's painting the use of edges. The development in St Ives was communicated to Clement Greenberg, during his visit to St Ives in 1959, by Heron and others. It also reached to the New York painters as there were exhibitions of St Ives painters in New York in the late fifties to which most Abstract Expressionists went. Also there were other views that gave the credit to Bonnard himself because from 1929, when de Hauke and company showed forty of his paintings, and until the large retrospective exhibition at the MOMA in 1948, Bonnard was regularly exhibited in the USA. It was the works of Bonnard themselves that gave the example to Americans directly.

³³ See *The Changing Forms of Art*. This essay was written by Heron for *Horizon* originally but was refused.

³⁴ Patrick Heron, 'The British influence on New York,' *The Guardian*, 10, 11, 12, Oct. 1974.

³⁵ Brandon Tylar, 'British colour abstraction in the case of Patrick Heron,' *Art History*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1980.

³⁶ Patrick Heron, *The Changing Forms of Art*, Kegan Paul, London, 1955, p. 31.

³⁷ Patrick Heron, 'Americans in the Tate,' *Arts*, March 1956.

³⁸ Alan Bowness, *Alan Davie*, Lund Humphries, London, 1967.

³⁹ Andian Lewis, 'Avant garde art in the fifties I,' *Artscribe*, No. 34, 1982.

⁴⁰ Douglas Hall, 'Introducing Alan Davie,' *Alan Davie*, Lund Humphries, London, 1992, p. 16.

⁴¹ Davie's use of unstretched canvas on the floor may, according to Douglas Hall, be a result of an obligation to paint rapidly in a small hotel room during his trip in the Continent. Douglas Hall, 'Introducing Alan Davie,' *Alan Davie*, Lund Humphries, London, 1992, p. 22.

⁴² Alan Bowness, *Alan Davie*, Lund Humphries, London, 1967. p. 171.

⁴³ Quite a few Abstract Expressionists themselves were interested in Zen and other Oriental thoughts at some points in later 1940s and early 1950s. Detailed studies was carried out by D. J. Clarke in his *Influence of Oriental Thought on Postwar American Painting & Sculpture*, PhD thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 1983.

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- 44 Daisetz T. Suzuki, 'Introduction,' in Eugen Herrigel *Zen in the Art of Archery*, 1954.
- 45 Alan Davie, in catalogue of the Alan Davie retrospective exhibition, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, June 1958.
- 46 Naum Gabo, 'The constructive idea in art,' N. Gabo, J. L. Martin and B. Nicholson eds., *Circle*, 1937.
- 47 Commissioned in April 1950 for the Festival of Britain's *60 Paintings for '51*.
- 48 Peter Lanyon, notes dated 28 March 1962, quoted in Andrew Lanyon, *Peter Lanyon 1918-1964*, Andrew Lanyon, 1990, p. 285.
- 49 Peter Lanyon, Andrew Lanyon, *Peter Lanyon 1918-1964*, 1990, p. 17.
- 50 Patrick Heron, 'The British influences on New York,' *The Guardian*, 10, 11, 12, October 1974.
- 51 Peter Lanyon, in Andrew Lanyon, *Peter Lanyon 1918-1964*, Andrew Lanyon, 1990.
- 52 Patrick Heron, 'The Americans in the Tate', *Arts*, March 1956.
- 53 For instance the older generation artists Maurice Denis, Emile Bernard, Maurice Asselin.
- 54 Quoted by Norbert Lynton in his *Norbert Lynton on William Scott*, Bernard Jacobson Gallery, 1990, n/p.
- 55 John Russell, 'Introduction,' *William Scott*, Hanover Gallery, 17 May - 17 June 1961.
- 56 William Scott, *Statement*, 1947.
- 57 As quoted by Alan Bowness in *William Scott*, Lund Humphries, 1964.
- 58 William Scott, in catalogue for the *New decade exhibition*, 1955.
- 59 See note 32.
- 60 Norbert Lynton, *Norbert Lynton on William Scott*, Bernard Jacobson Gallery, London, 1990, n/p.
- 61 Adrian Heath, 'Recollections and movements,' *Terry Frost, painting in the 1980s*, University of Reading, 1986, p. 21.
- 62 Terry Frost, Conversation with Adrian Lewis, summer 1980. in notes 27, 'British avant garde painting 1945-1956, part III,' *Artscribe*, No. 36, June 1982, p. 19.
- 63 Adrian Heath, 'Recollections and movements,' *Terry Frost, painting in the 1980s*, University of Reading, 1986, p. 15.
- 64 Interview with David Lewis, Dec. 1991, in David Lewis, *Terry Frost: A Personal Narrative*, Scolar Press, 1994.

⁶⁵ Terry Frost, Statement in Lawrence Alloway, *Nine Abstract Artists*, Taranti, 1954.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Terry Frost, Letter to Roger Hilton, Tate Gallery Archive, n/d.

⁶⁸ Terry Frost, Letter to Yan Fel Feather, 1 March 1960, printed in David Lewis, *Terry Frost: A Personal Narrative*, Scolar Press, 1994, p. 168.

⁶⁹ Adrian Heath, 'Recollections and Movements,' *Terry Frost: Painting in the 1980's*, University of Reading, 1986, p. 21.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 22.

Chapter 5

THE BRITISH RESPONSE - THE YOUNGER GENERATION

Towards the end of the fifties a cluster of events demonstrated the emergence of a new temperament in British abstract art. In 1958 Heron, a primary spokesman for the St Ives painters, gave up critical writing altogether in order to concentrate solely on painting.¹ Heron's decision had unfavourable consequences for the artists he supported - most of them faded to some degree and took a lower profile - although Heron himself remained controversial through radical changes of style. In the meantime Lawrence Alloway, using the Institute of Contemporary Art and the Independent Group as a platform, became increasingly prominent. On occasions Alloway showed his disagreement with both the St Ives painters and the constructivists, although until 1958 he was still attempting to yoke together trends in Europe, America and Britain, as for example, in the exhibition *Abstract Impressionism* he and Harold Cohen organised for the Arts Council in that year.² Alloway publicised his break with both the St Ives painters and the constructivists in his review of *Place* in 1959. From now on Alloway concentrated on the activities associated with the younger generation artists and acted as a spokesman for them.

New American Painting in 1959 was an exhibition dedicated to the triumph of Abstract Expressionism, but it also showed interested British artists a new tendency from New York, mainly by including Newman. Paintings by Newman in the exhibition, together with the appearance of a few paintings by the New York Hard-Edge painter Ellsworth Kelly, diverted young British artists' attention away from gestural Abstract Expressionism.³ This change in direction was soon assured by exhibitions

in London to which many new abstract painters in New York and the West Coast, in addition to Kelly, were contributors.

The intense activities of a younger generation were led by Alloway and William Turnbull. The latter's painting, which for a few years had been under the influence of gestural Abstract Expressionism, now reached a point in 1958 comparable with Newman's colour field painting. Robyn Denny, Ralph Rumney, Richard Smith, together with the critic Roger Coleman put forth the *Place* exhibition in 1959 that in many ways was already in the realm of the new abstract painting and anticipated the predominant section of exhibits in *Situation* in 1960 - an anthology of abstract paintings by 18 young painters. Many of the participants in *Situation* became dominant figures in the sixties, after engaging with the later development of Abstract Expressionism.

Much of what happened to abstract art in 1959 was connected with the Independent Group, the promoter of a new cultural and aesthetic consensus since its formation in 1952. The Independent Group was developed from informal meetings of a few artists and critics at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in the early spring of 1952. After Reyner Banham took the leadership these meetings were better organised and by the winter of 1952 the participants of the meetings, at times conveniently called the Young Group, became established as The Independent Group.⁴ Within a few years the Independent Group functioned as an inner research department of the Institute, feeding it with ideas for discussion and education programmes. The Independent Group assigned itself the task to tackle issues in contemporary British art. It ambitiously proposed and accomplished the series of lectures called 'Aesthetic Problems of Contemporary Art' which became a forum to criticise systematically the legacies of Roger Fry and Herbert Read. The

Independent Group was in its heyday after its members successfully launched *This Is Tomorrow* at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1956.

In so far as the members of the Independent Group were in a similar position to the younger generation artists during the turbulence of the war and difficulties during the subsequent period of reconstruction, they shared a similar attitude to art. In addition there seemed to be no senior figures in the British art scene, who could command the respect of the younger generation artists.⁵ Towards the end of the 1950s Lawrence Alloway and William Turnbull, both members of the Independent Group, drew around them some young abstract painters, many of whom were later involved in the *Situation* exhibition. They and the young artists saw, from both American mass media and the high art of Abstract Expressionism, a vigour and freshness that was absent from contemporary British art.⁶ A strange combination of mass media and Abstract Expressionism, particularly the more radical pole of Abstract Expressionism - the colour field painting, was the frame of reference Alloway exploited to distinguish his coterie from both pre-war abstraction and from post-war St. Ives landscape-derived abstract painting. From an urbanised American culture he envisaged his version of internationalism, which he now started to promote. To Alloway and his circle, to be international meant to come to terms with either Abstract Expressionism or American mass media, or both.

As the new ideas were discussed mostly in the ICA for the time being, The Independent Group provided an example of progressiveness which was not available from the exhibition programmes of contemporary British art in London galleries or from teachings in art schools. The focus of The Independent Group discussions contrasted with what a large section of the British art world was doing. Therefore it became an attraction to young artists, many of whom were still in art school. Richard Smith, Robyn Denny, John Hoyland, John Plumb and others who later became

predominant figures in the sixties had attended the ICA discussions and 'Talk' run by Alloway and other members of the Independent Group. The Independent Group also extended its influence beyond the ICA platform when some of its members carried out their teaching duties at various summer schools and evening classes. John Hoyland, who was studying at the Royal Academy Schools, William Green and Brian Young went to evening classes taught by Turnbull at the Central School. They were a few among many others who started their relationships with the Independent Group members this way.

Alloway and Turnbull were working on and promoting most diligently the new British abstract painting. Alloway engaged with the contemporary art scene with his writing, his role in both the Independent Group and the ICA itself and, perhaps more importantly, his close contact with young artists. As a critic and a lecturer at the Courtauld Institute of Art Alloway came to the ICA in 1953. In September the same year he was appointed to the ICA Exhibition Sub-Committee after Toni del Renzio's resignation. Alloway played an increasingly important role in both the Independent Group and the Institute itself, especially after 1954 when Banham relinquished his role as the Independent Group convenor (which Alloway and John McHale took over) in order to concentrate on his PhD thesis at the Courtauld Institute. Alloway's importance within the ICA was consolidated in 1956 when he was appointed assistant director of the Institute. As a result his influence upon the programmes and events increased accordingly.⁷

The discussions organised by Alloway and McHale were pluralistic. They were not restricted to the supposed boundaries of art and culture; paintings by Richard Hamilton were, for example, discussed in relation to chase scenes in Hollywood movies. The notion underlying these cross-boundary discussions was the fine art/popular art continuum, a phrase coined by Alloway whereby he was able to place elite art and the popular

art at the same level.⁸ These discussions helped to form a consensus among the interested audience that new art must come to terms with science and consumer popular culture - a necessity in a highly developed society like that of the United States. Nevertheless abstract art remained one of Alloway's main interests and his published writing in the period was more concerned with abstract art than with popular culture.

In 1957 Alloway expanded the scale of his influence to the Royal College of Art through the critic Roger Coleman, who was a regular at the ICA platform discussions and an admirer of Alloway, and who had recently taken over the editorship of the RCA magazine *Ark*. While Coleman was working on transforming it into an 'internationally oriented lively and off-beat review,' he invited Alloway to contribute to *Ark* in early 1957.⁹ The offer was taken up with enthusiasm by Alloway and his article appeared among those by Robyn Denny, Richard Smith and Peter Blake - these articles were on popular culture, mass media, and science fiction. After this Coleman and Alloway, sharing similar interests and attitudes in contemporary art and culture, became friends. Later Alloway invited Coleman to take the place in the ICA Exhibitions Sub-Committee left by David Sylvester who had recently resigned. Coleman brought Richard Smith, Robyn Denny and Peter Blake with him to discussions and exposed them to the ideas of both Alloway and Turnbull. In his vantage position in the Exhibitions Sub-committee, Coleman also arranged to have them exhibited in the ICA.

William Turnbull engaged in activities in the ICA when he exhibited there in *Aspects of British Art* (1950) and, subsequently, in *Young Sculptors* (1952). He was one of those who initiated the very first meetings of the Young Group and was an active participant in both sections of Independent Group meetings and discussions convened by Banham or Alloway and McHale.¹⁰ Turnbull earned the respect of young avant garde artists in London and became a source of inspiration to them after 1958

when he as an artist was well ahead, in conceptual terms, of other major British abstract artists.

Representational imagery in Turnbull's painting had already been eliminated step by step before 1956. Thereafter, he was exploring in a direction that was influenced by the gestural Abstract Expressionist paintings at the Tate Gallery in 1956. What made him a significant figure however, was his next step towards a pictorial simplicity in 1957-1958. As his painting of 1958 was almost parallel with the newest paintings in the United States, he became regarded highly by the young artists and his colleagues in the Independent Group.

Turnbull's significance to young British artists was seen in the context of the development in abstract painting in America itself. In early 1954 when Ellsworth Kelly went back to New York from Paris he found young American painters disproportionately involved with action painting following the examples of Pollock, Hofmann, and particularly de Kooning. Splash, drip and stain were the common features of their paintings.¹¹ The British young artists who were investigating the American scene at first hand, also witnessed the dullness of the academicized gestural Abstract Expressionism in New York at a later date:

I realized quite suddenly ... that what we had bought was an ideal. We had seen too little to be able to distinguish the good from the bad; anything in which the ideal could be seen - the ideal of free, unfettered action - was O.K. But in New York it was painfully clear that Abstract Expressionism was an academy founded on the work of de Kooning and very few others.... The academy seemed to me to represent the very apotheosis of self-indulgence.¹²

The situation eventually alerted American critics to a crisis and then the colour field paintings, particularly those of Newman, were recognised as progressive within Abstract Expressionism. In the new context Newman became a prominent figure as an artist with great capacity and

complexity, although his large colour field painting looked extremely simple.

It is difficult to decide whether Turnbull knowingly responded to Newman's painting, which his paintings resembled, or whether he reached the position independently, because Turnbull was a well informed artist; he visited New York for the first time early in 1957. In New York he saw at first hand the work of all the major Abstract Expressionists. The works by Rothko and Still had the strongest impact on him. Turnbull was less interested in the works by de Kooning and Kline. Some works by Pollock were, however, appealing to him for their all-over quality of composition. What Turnbull looked hard at in American painting was the sheer material facts of paint and flat surface that are best exemplified by Newman's painting. Turnbull claimed that Newman was still 'in wilderness' in 1957 during his visit to New York.¹³ Although Newman was absent from the exhibition scene in New York for most of the fifties and he was not included in the *Modern Art from the United States* exhibition, he was one of the major Abstract Expressionists discussed in Greenberg's important essay 'American-Type Painting' in 1955. It would be extraordinary if Turnbull had not heard of Newman before or during his stay in New York.

Whether or not Turnbull was influenced by Newman, Alloway thought his development was independent as he affirmed in 1962:

His paintings have been influential and so has his independence which has worked as a psychological influence. Only a few people have seen his paintings in the last three years, but he has affected artistically and/or psychologically many of the younger artists.¹⁴

Newman's paintings were introduced to British artists in *American New Painting* in 1959. The trend initiated by Newman's paintings was reinforced by other artists, including Ellsworth Kelly, Jack Youngerman,

Myron Stout and Leon Smith in New York and McLaughlin, Hammersley, Feitelson and Benjamin on the West Coast. They produced paintings that were characterised as Hard-Edge, a term originally coined by Jules Langsner in 1958 in an introduction to a Los Angeles exhibition and popularized in Britain by Lawrence Alloway.¹⁵ After 1959 the works of these new American abstract painters were increasingly exposed in London. Coleman recorded how Hard-Edge painters became known to British artists:

The term 'hard-edge' has been in use around some English studios for some time, but until a fortnight ago it had invoiced only a small shipment of goods - the two paintings by Ellsworth Kelly in the exhibition *Seventeen Contemporary American Painters* at the USIS eighteen months ago. These two Kellys, together with news of several more in a private collection and the collection of a London dealer, plus a Maeght catalogue and few reproductions were the only clues over here to what kind of painting the term fitted
....¹⁶

Kelly's exhibition at the Maeght Gallery in Paris was visited by the London collector E. J. Power who bought a number of Kelly's canvases on that occasion. They were made available to some artists in his London flat.¹⁷ During the subsequent few years, Kelly remained a popular subject for exhibitions in London galleries. His Hard-Edge painting was regarded by British artists as an authentic advance from Abstract Expressionism for, it not only followed immediately after the most important exposure of colour field paintings by Newman in *New American Painting* but also it was in accordance with the theory of Greenberg whose 'prophecy of stylistic directions, at least to many minds, had become true' in the late fifties.¹⁸ The fact that Greenberg was winning the debate with Rosenberg helped the recognition of the Hard-Edge painting as the leading style, although Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitsky, who were most in Greenberg's favour as the successors to

classic gestural Abstract Expressionists, were seen in Britain later; the works by Louis and Noland were introduced to British artists in *The New York Scene* exhibition at the Marlborough New London Gallery in October 1961.

The young abstract artists in London were now preoccupied with Hard-Edge painting. Its presence in London galleries confirmed Turnbull's authority. Turnbull as a progressive painter have equal influence to young artists as that of Alloway as a theorist and organiser. In addition to his role in The Independent Group, Turnbull taught at various summer schools so that his ideas were perhaps more widely available to young artists.

Alloway and Turnbull helped enormously in creating the momentum for the new British abstract painting. Their joint work with young artists, especially after they started their regular meetings at Alloway's dinner parties on a weekly basis in 1959, eventually earned their movement an international status.

Alloway began to promote some young artists as early as 1957; for instance in an article Alloway singled out Richard Smith, William Green and Robyn Denny. According to Alloway they had distinguished themselves in 1956 by simultaneously developing a free painterly style, in line with American development, which put them squarely 'in opposition to the staff and the indifference of the rest of the student body.'¹⁹ Alloway's articles in their support were in catalogue introductions and in his usual outlets, such as, *Art News and Review*, *European Art This Month* (the later *Art International*) and *Architectural Design*.

ICA, the power base of Alloway, hosted many exhibitions which included or were devoted to works by young artists. Coleman, who was in the ICA exhibition sub-committee, organised exhibitions in which his friends received a showing. *Five Young Painters*, one of them in 1958, for instance, included Denny, Smith and Rumney. In fact the young artists had

dominated the exhibitions at the ICA; by the end of 1960, Denny, William Green, Peter Hobbs, Bob Law, Rumney, Smith, Turnbull and Gillian Ayres all had exhibited there. The newly established avant-garde art gallery New Vision Centre was also a showcase for quite a few young abstract artists. John Plumb's action painting was exhibited in that gallery as early as in 1957 and in subsequent years.²⁰

In 1957 and 1958 the young artists also steadily increased their shares in some important exhibition surveys of abstract art in Britain; in *Statement: a Review of British Abstract Painting* at the ICA in 1956, *Metavisual, Tachiste, Abstract* at Redfern Gallery in 1957, *Dimensions: British Abstract Art 1948-1957* at the O'Hana Gallery, the Arts Council's touring exhibition *New Trend in Painting* in 1958 and *Abstract Impressionism* in 1959. It was apparent that during the same period young artists who were still following gestural Abstract Expressionism were sidelined. Basil Beattie who 'only got to Pollock,' for example, was excluded in some major exhibitions.²¹

It was not until 1959 that many young artists were in the same process in 'shedding the gestural, action elements from their work' as their contemporaries in the United States.²² And Kelly gave them the confirmation that they were in the right direction:

.... In Kelly's work these artists found a parallel of their own interests. This combination of more or less personal discovery and the reputation of the largely unseen Kelly led, it seems, to a tacit belief that hard-edge was really something like a Rothko done with a ruler. subsequently, this notion of hard-edge became an orientation in what appeared to be a fairly spontaneous desire to escape from the pressure of the giants of New York without actually turning their backs upon them.²³

Hard-Edge in its British currency could now be applied to some native British artists and in less than two years between 1959 and 1960, the

younger avant garde artists acted vigorously and were winning recognition. A new phase of the British abstract painting became recognised after the two all important exhibitions: *Place* in 1959 and, more particularly, *Situation* in 1960.

Place was held at the ICA in September 1959. Three artists - Ralph Rumney, Richard Smith and Robyn Denny - in co-operation with the critic Roger Coleman launched the exhibition. The exhibits were painted especially for the exhibition and the size of the paintings in the exhibition were consistent (either 7' x 6' or 7' x 4', Fig. 24, 25, 26.) in order to unite the exhibits as a whole and to act as a base from which each of the artists could maximise their individuality.²⁴ The number of colours used in these paintings were also limited (to red, black, green and white) for the same reason. *Place* was an 'enterprise' of 'public art,' like others in a series of events in the late fifties.²⁵

The paintings were arranged in a configuration to form corridors and vistas in which the spectators were confronted at every step by painted surfaces.²⁶ The arrangement reflected Rumney's proposal to 'divide the floor into squares of a convenient size for one person to stand in' and the squares should be blocked by pictures or written information or obstacles to form a maze situation in which the spectators were required to 'find a route through.'²⁷ Another radical feature was that the large paintings were placed on the floor instead of hung on a wall (Fig. 27). The reason for this was, according to Alloway, to bring paintings 'close to us, into our space, by being on our floor.'²⁸

To involve spectators in a participative relationship with exhibits was not new. It had been an interest among some British artists since the mid fifties. *An Exhibit*, conducted by Victor Pasmore and Richard Hamilton, with the help of Alloway, at the ICA in 1957, was an earlier attempt to explore in that direction.²⁹ They defined, sometimes manipulated, the exhibition space with abstract paintings in order to

lead spectators in a visual situation which was not available under normal circumstances. The spectator should, as Alloway stressed on the occasion, be encouraged to obtain a 'participative' and 'playful' experience.³⁰ Similar ideas were found in *This Is Tomorrow* at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1956 as well. They were, however, exploited to full in *Place*.

As early as 1956, some students at the Royal College of Art were planning an exhibition, in many ways the embryo of *Place*, that should be

a group project stressing certain agreed attitudes about the function of painting in a certain context at certain time. This would have included an attempt to activate the architectural and human context of the work, the paintings acting as both a physical and creative, psychological sculptural event, imposing a greater burden of participation on the part of the spectator.³¹

In the realised exhibition three years later, their concept of spectator participation involved games theory, mass media and the environmental implication of large American canvases. The notion of involving spectators in a participative relationship with large scale canvases gained recently overall importance and was a major contribution of *Place* to the new British abstract painting of the early sixties.

Coleman's text for *Place* listed American large paintings as one of the three backgrounds of the exhibition. He pointed out that in the works of Pollock, Rothko, Newman and Still, 'space tends to be a direct function of the size of the painting surface and it has been called environmental.'³² A painting on such a scale expanded into the spectator's space so that a greater degree of involvement of the spectator with painting resulted. The artists in *Place* achieved a higher degree of spectator participation when they brought their paintings even closer to the spectators than large Abstract Expressionist paintings.

This resulted from their enthusiasm and experience with large screen cinemas and it was regarded by Coleman as an 'exclusively English' achievement.³³ Alloway argued that the British idea of environmental painting went beyond Abstract Expressionist painting:

.... American painters achieve the immersion of the spectator in their big pictures, but simply as a side effect of painting the things.... In England the younger abstract artists have been expressly concerned with the painting-spectator relationship. Their impulse to reduce 'physical' distance is influenced by the mass media.³⁴

The conception of painting-spectator spatial communication explored in *Place* was also the theme of *Situation* one year later, and also of much the new British abstract painting. The interest in spatial communication and the resulting pattern from *Place* provoked, firstly, a concern with the role of perceptual ambiguity and, secondly, an independent interpretation of American-inspired scale. These were the two factors that made the development of 'a new kind of British painting possible.'³⁵ As we shall see much of discussions and argument about the paintings in the *Situation* exhibition were about these two themes.

Situation: an Exhibition of British Abstract Painting was held at the Royal Institute of British Artists Galleries in Suffolk Street in September 1960. It was organized by a committee composed of Lawrence Alloway, Roger Coleman and the participating artists. The exhibition was initiated and discussed at the regular dinner parties and meetings at Alloway's house. The title for the exhibition was arrived at by abbreviating the subject of favourite topics of conversation at these parties concerning the present situation in London. This exhibition was to show their awareness of that 'situation.'³⁶ Alternatively the title could be explained by the size of the paintings which enveloped the spectators and absorbed and drew them into a situation.

One of the main purposes of *Situation* was to provide a showcase for large works produced by young artists. Works in extra large format (most of them worked on such a format) hardly found exhibition space in London. On the one hand there was a lack of support from dealers - a fact reflecting a widespread indifference, if not hostility. Gimpel Fils, for example, was 'the closest thing in England to Betty Parsons Gallery in New York, or René Drouin's in Paris' - these were galleries devoted to the discovery of experimental artists - and it was also a place where the artists themselves gathered. The gallery nonetheless ceased taking more young artists after 1957.³⁷ The Redfern Gallery took on a group of new painters, including Gillian Ayres, Robyn Denny and Gwyther Irwin, in the controversial exhibition *Metavisual, Tachiste, Abstract* when Gimpel Fils withdrew support. Soon even Redfern lost interest in young abstract painters.³⁸ On the other hand the young artists' preference for large size posed practical problems. Most London gallery spaces did not match the scale of their paintings which were often larger than they could possibly show.³⁹

The list of exhibitors for the first *Situation* numbered twenty artists. These were Gillian Ayres, Bernard and Harold Cohen, Peter Coviello, Robyn Denny, John Epstein, William Green, Peter Hobbs, Gordon House, John Hoyland, Gwyther Irwin, Bob Law, Henry Mundy, John Plumb, Ralph Rumney, Richard Smith, Peter Stroud, William Turnbull, Marc Vaux and Brian Young. Of these twenty, however, only eighteen were actually to exhibit. Peter Hobbs withdrew at the last moment and Richard Smith's paintings never arrived from New York. Tess Jaray, Marc Vaux's wife had been invited to exhibit but declined because she felt that she was not yet ready to show with the others. The works in the exhibition reflected a broad spectrum of styles and persuasions as originally the aim of the *Situation* exhibition was not to promote one kind of painting.⁴⁰ Those who were present in the show constituted only a smaller number of those

proposed. A few Middle Generation painters, Alan Davie for example, were invited although they declined to be in the exhibition.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the resulting exhibition showed that the organisers had clear and well considered selection criteria, which were exposed both in Coleman's catalogue introduction and in Alloway's review in *Art News and Review*.

The selection criteria were controversial and the application of them was problematic. All exhibits were supposed to satisfy two requirements: they must be abstract in the sense that they should have no explicit references to the objective world and, they must be no less than 30 square feet.⁴² While the organisers excluded the St Ives landscape abstract painters from the show on the grounds that they had explicit references to the landscape and other objects, they allowed the admission of some young painters who worked almost in the same way as the St Ives painters; for instance, Law, who derived his huge painting from his spatial experiences in the natural surroundings of Cornwall where he lived from 1956-1960.

The financial outcome of the exhibition was a disaster although Lawrence and Coleman did manage to get sponsorships from government institutions as well as commercial organisations.⁴³ Attendance at the exhibition was a record low for the Gallery.⁴⁴ The exhibition was, however, a great success in drawing close attention from the art establishments and media. Alloway also persuaded Betty Parsons, whom Alloway had met in New York in 1958, to come to see the exhibition. At some stage Betty Parsons was prompted to buy Bernard Cohen's *Painting 108* 1959 for £200. She remarked that she had seen nothing like the works in *Situation* in New York.⁴⁵

More significant were the works themselves. The paintings in the exhibition constituted a confident statement that British art has never since been able wholly to ignore. Actually several of the *Situation* painters were very influential through their art and their teaching. The

artists themselves seemed rather conscious of the historical importance of what they were doing. Only a few years later Denny commented

Situation was just the beginning of something - I think if one saw the paintings again they might look rather dreary now. What is going to happen in the next twenty years is the most important thing.⁴⁶

The importance of the exhibition was recognised by the art establishments immediately. The next year a second *Situation* exhibition was held at the Marlborough New London Galleries. Even at this early time the artists and supporters were so confident that they intended to make it an annual event in the London contemporary art scene, as it was indicated in the forewords for the catalogue. The Arts Council organised the third *Situation* exhibition, *Situation: an Exhibition of British Abstract Art*, which toured the country between November 1962 and May 1963. In 1966, only few years after their effective exposure in *Situation*, Bernard Cohen, Harold Cohen, Richard Smith, Robyn Denny (all are major participants in the *Situation* exhibition in 1960) and Antony Caro (exhibitor in the New London Gallery *Situation* exhibition in 1961) were chosen by the British Council to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale in 1966. *Situation* was a significant event that established these major abstract artists of the decade and brought them official recognition.

Both *Place* and *Situation* were important as such but the latter drew works from a wider spectrum of the British artists. Its themes covered or overlapped those of *Place*, and those who dominated the exhibition, Turnbull, Bernard Cohen, Harold Cohen, John Plumb, Robyn Denny and John Hoyland, the Hard-Edge painters or 'formal painters' as Coleman called them, had more affinity with *Place* than the other participants.

These formal painters were, according to Coleman, in a 'general move towards a simpler, in some cases more formal, use of the canvas.'⁴⁷ They all were under the influence of some gestural abstract painting for some time but were no longer satisfied with the spontaneous mark-making technique. The flaccid style of gestural Abstract Expressionist painting did not allow them to articulate their visions with enough clarity. It had also become a mannerism that led to an undesirable family resemblance. In short, the mode of painting started to limit rather than liberate their creativity. Denny's paintings, as well as those of Bernard Cohen, Denny and Turnbull, were among the most precisely articulated in the exhibition: edges were fine and precise; areas of colour were flat and textural character was concealed by the painter's emphasis on the technical making of painting (Fig. 32, 33).

Later *Situation* evolved as a blanket term referring only to the paintings by these mainstream participants. There was however complexity of persuasion even within this narrow domain.⁴⁸ John Plumb presented an interesting example of how one may be misled by the appearance of painting. Plumb's painting had the look of a typical Hard Edge painting. Ironically his painting was deeply rooted in Pollock's gestural painting. Plumb mentioned in an interview that Pollock was 'the greatest abstract painter' who had influenced him most profoundly.⁴⁹ Plumb employed bright self-adhesive PVA tapes, which were used in the electronic industry to identify codes in tangles of wires and cables, to compose his painting. Different bands were quickly applied to canvases and then torn off again, such technique reflecting his desire to preserve the gestural element of Pollock's painting. While Plumb maintained that 'tapes gave me a more tensile line than was ever possible with a brush,' he felt an urge for a sense of immediacy - although in a seemingly very formal structure.⁵⁰

These formal paintings were the main topics for most of the writing about *Situation*. Coleman and Alloway as the principal

commentators on the exhibition certainly gave exceptional weight to the formal painters and their painting was seen as the start of the new British abstract art. These paintings were, to Coleman and Alloway, the only species among all abstract art practices available in Britain that were adventurous and obviously mainstream. Both men explicitly connected the practices of the formal painters with Abstract Expressionism. It seemed to them most of the concepts developed from Abstract Expressionist painting were valid in the new British abstract painting.

One of the concepts they emphasised again and again was the implication of the large size of canvas which in *Situation* was as important as a manifesto. The combination of use of large scale and rigorous abstraction produced, Coleman explains, paintings which worked in a quite different way from previous abstract art. Such paintings were perceived as 'environmental' - at a normal viewing distance a large painting may just fill the spectator's whole field of vision and even to the point that it demanded 'a turn of the head of several degrees right or left' before it can be fully 'incorporated into a complete visual experience.'⁵¹

The investigation of the sources of such a notion by Alloway revealed that 'Greenberg was the first writer to point out the compensating expansion of paintings' Alloway also found that Greenberg developed this idea from his study of Monet's development from the small, naturalistic paintings to the magnitude of his later water-lily paintings.⁵² Alloway knew that quite a few Abstract Expressionists were conscious of the implication of large sized canvas. It was well-known that Pollock, as well as Rothko, once claimed they were 'in' painting when they worked on a large canvas. Newman also urged the spectators of his painting that 'the large pictures ... are intended to be seen from a short distance.'⁵³ Alloway made a similar plea to the spectators in *Situation*:

.... Many of the paintings in *Situation* are not intended as the terminals of vistas (though they often function effectively as that). These paintings with their flatness and coloristic intensity can be observed from close-up and from various oblique angles.⁵⁴

Exploring the possibility provided by large size in order 'to create a more dynamic relation between the painting, its environment and its audience' was legitimised by Alloway and Coleman as one of the most important goals of the new abstract painting.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, some *Situation* exhibitors may initially have taken on large scale canvas for other reasons. For instance Gillian Ayres, who showed works of over 30, 44 and 100 square feet in *Situation*, started painting on a large scale in 1957 after an approximately 80 square foot mural commission for South Hampstead Girl's School.

Another concept associated with Abstract Expressionism which Coleman was keen to connect with *Situation* was that of Rosenberg's 'action painting.' While the informal paintings in the exhibition had an obvious debt to it, the formal paintings were difficult to relate to it, because they had a layout with clarity and definition. The point Coleman made was that these paintings actually were the result of a direct execution and this directness was reminiscent of 'action painting.' As the painting developed with improvisation the artists were able to have a more intimate relationship with it and to commit themselves to a kind of adventurousness. Therefore the progress of a painting should and could be perceived as an event, in the same way as that of an 'action painting' was. Nevertheless, Coleman did not lean too far in the direction and quickly applied the notion that the paintings were real objects rather than illusion of them.⁵⁶ He reiterated the statement by Alloway that Abstract Expressionist paintings 'create space by occupying it literally.'⁵⁷

It was interesting that, while both Alloway and Coleman defined the abstract paintings in *Situation*, rather closely in American terms, they were cautious to link explicitly their artists with American Hard-Edge paintings. Coleman did not mention them in his introduction at all although he knew the new development well - he wrote a review of the *West-coast Hard-Edge* exhibition at the ICA a few months previously, in which he also disclosed the popularity of Kelly among the younger abstract painters in London.⁵⁸ Alloway was aware of the existence of the Hard-Edge painting more than anyone else as the term Hard Edge itself was popularised in London's avant garde artist circle by him. He did not mention American Hard Edge painters in his review of *Situation*, although he warned of Rumney's dependence on Kelly in his review of *Place* a year before.⁵⁹

The connection between the paintings by the formal painters and American Hard Edge painters was made explicitly by the critics for mass circulated publications. P. Rawstorne stated in his column in the *News Chronicle* that, 'this important show (*Situation*) portrays massive influence by American artists, particularly the "Hard-Edge" school of the West Coast.'⁶⁰ The *West Coast Hard-Edge*, held at the ICA six months previously, was a handy conspicuous point of reference. David Sylvester, writing for the *New Statesman*, remarked on the similarity of 'three quarters' of *Situation* exhibits to Kelly, Newman and Jasper Johns. But quickly distinguished these British paintings as:

... a new kind of orthodoxy, a new style, and nothing could be further removed from the spirit which has informed the New York School, with its repugnance for the idea of style.... For the New York painters who matter, the practice of painting is a process of self discovery, not the exercise of an idea. For most of the painters in *Situation* the practice of art is a form of art criticism.⁶¹

For Alloway and his circle, there was nothing to be ashamed of in their affinity with the Americans. Alloway had been defending Abstract Expressionism as the cutting-edge of advanced art continuing the tradition of modern art. Even if the British young artists imitated the Americans, it would be a necessary and therefore positive step, to lodge their art in the most demanding practice of contemporary art:

It is important, if this American connection is to be understood, to realise that American art is not an exotic national style. It is the mainstream of modern art, which used to run through Paris. By their study of American art, these British painters located themselves in the tradition of modern art which has only shaky national representatives.⁶²

In this way Alloway bolstered the moral of the young artists and encouraged them to incorporate aspects of Abstract Expressionism. To his understanding, American art had mostly been 'an experience to those painters of the transition of modern art.'⁶³ The resemblance to American painting was inevitable and the confidence of the young British artists had to grow out from a period of dependence on the Americans.

In the subsequent few years the characters of the new British abstract art became more and more distinct. It seemed to Alloway that abstract paintings by British young artists, which had been associated with American painting for some time, had reached a level that they could be defined independently. 'Illusion and Environment in Recent British Art,' published in *Art International* in early 1962, was a major work Alloway contributed to the new British abstract art.⁶⁴ He drew his ideas mainly from the discussions in currency in London. Turnbull, for example, had talked about the concentration of the new art as 'perceptual ambiguities of colour in economically structured paintings.'⁶⁵ Coleman used a similar phrase to summarise the characteristic of the British Hard-Edge painting - 'cartographically simple but perceptually

complex.'⁶⁶ Alloway otherwise preferred to use the term 'ambiguous visual statement.'⁶⁷ He further declared that there were four conditions that led to a truly ambiguous visual statement. Firstly, the painting should provide the alternation of positive and negative forms in shifts which involve the whole picture area, in other words, the ambiguity of figure-field relationships. Secondly, colour was used in ways that emphasised perceptual uncertainty - either juxtaposition of different hues that were close in tonal value, or in the saturation of large areas of colour - so that complementary after-images were included in the spectator's eye. Thirdly, the surface of painting tended to be texturally restrained, often immaculate, continuous, modified by colour activity in the spectator's attention, rather than by autographic or improvisational handling. And finally, forms were usually few, large in proportion to the total picture areas and span the whole picture from edge to edge. In general the artists were not concerned with order but with ambiguity and the sphere of illusion.⁶⁸

Most of the formal paintings in *Situation* may serve to illustrate Alloway's theory. In Ralph Rumney's head series, for example, the relationship of form and ground tended to oscillate; the large flat areas of colour encouraged after-images; the surface was so texturally restrained as to deny the intervention of the human hand, and, the forms were few and large in proportion to the total picture area. Denny, Plumb and Bernard Cohen's paintings, too, were among the most precisely articulated abstract paintings in Britain and possessed the same characteristics. Illusory spatial effects were utilized by them to activate the surface and to draw the spectator into a more pressurised visual relationship with the works of art.⁶⁹ This concern was also shown in Hoyland's paintings in *Situation* in which dark and light coloured bands decreased downwards in proportion, inverting traditional perspective effects while alternating coloured frames to prevent the

spectator from deciding on which of the two colours used constituted a ground.

The formal characteristic of these Hard-Edge paintings may lead to an easy misinterpretation in terms of geometric abstraction of the thirties.⁷⁰ Coleman stressed in the catalogue introduction to *Situation* and Alloway reiterated in 1961 that, the formal paintings cannot be termed 'geometric.' Alloway also attempted to prevent the use of the word 'classical' in connection with these paintings.⁷¹ Both Coleman and Alloway pointed out that in earlier geometric painting an underlying spatial order co-ordinated the parts into a whole while illusion was denied and replaced by the concrete. The current abstract painting was otherwise not concerned with the Platonic concept of order that had inspired most geometric art.⁷² Their differentiation of the formal painting from previous abstraction was interestingly parallel with that which Greenberg did for the Post Painterly Abstraction in the United States.

In *Situation*, the somewhat neglected 'informal painters,' as opposed to the formal painters, were still continuing what they had derived from the gestural Abstract Expressionists. Gillian Ayres, William Green and Henry Mundy were among the most persistent. After seeing a photograph of Jackson Pollock at work in 1954, Ayres started to pour paint from cans or squirt it from tubes onto her canvases. From 1957 she combined brushwork with these techniques to allow herself a greater degree of control over her medium while she was still not averse to the accidental effects obtained by squirting and splashing, running and dribbling paint. Ayres' *Situation* works were painted with housepainter's brushes on canvases that swim in turpentine. Such technique allowed forms to swirl and merge while subjecting them to a basic rhythm.⁷³ William Green was well known as an 'action' painter after immense publicity from the press in 1956. The range of materials he used in painting included

tar, sand and bitumen and he exploited various unconventional means in the making of his paintings, such as burning painted surfaces and riding a bicycle over a canvas on floor in order to leave tarred surfaces criss-crossed by wheel textures. Green's great interests in the physical handling of materials led in his finished painting to a hard and brutal appearance. Mundy's painting, by contrast, has a carefully worked out composition which was revised constantly directly on the canvas and thus in its final state his imagery was still fluid. Thick, opaque paint was bounded by 'a scratched, rubbed, scrawled with graphite, with a knife, or with a soft brush.'⁷⁴ In spite of this his art maintained constantly a close relationship with the romantic and traditional types of British painting (Fig. 34).

Two other informal artists, Gwyther Irwin and Bob Law shared an interest in landscape in Cornwall, which somehow brought them close to the St Ives Middle Generation painters. While the canvases of Gwyther Irwin were primarily concerned with the painterly flickering effects of delicately collaged paper, the artist was motivated to communicate his experience from Cornish landscape:

My work is a sequence, or cycle, of reflective experiences which stem from the visual impact of the Cornish coast. The character and textural qualities of rock faces; the moods and rhythms of the sea, are the soul of my work as a painter.⁷⁵

Bob Law, too, drew his inspiration from the Cornish landscape, where he lived from 1956-1960. Compared with Irwin, he was more interested in the suggestive meaning of man and nature in landscape rather than the physical characteristics of the landscape. In 1959 he began a series of philosophical paintings which related to his *Situation* canvases. Law made drawings while lying in fields or immediately afterwards. Law's enthusiasm to bodily experience nature was an more

philosophical one and was different from that of Peter Lanyon and Terry Frost:

The early field drawings were about the position of myself on the face of the earth, and the environmental conditions around me; the position of the sun, the man, the stars, the direction of the wind, the way in which the trees grew, an awareness of nature's elements, an awareness of nature itself and my position in nature on earth in a particular position in time.⁷⁶

There were many reasons for the predominance of the formal paintings in *Situation* and their sequence in the sixties, such as those discussed in formal terms so far. The more fundamental one was perhaps that the formal painting represented a conscious attempt to seize the spirit of a new urbanism. London was charged with a revitalised urban life, as reflected by the critical literature in magazines like *Ark*, *Gazette*, *Architectural Design* among others. The painters were aware of the new experience of the city and excited by what they saw in streets in London where new office buildings sprang up rapidly and traffic signs appeared numerously at the demand of modern transport. Gordon House, an exhibitor of the New London Gallery *Situation* exhibition in 1961, linked his Hard-Edge enamel painting to urban traffic signs.⁷⁷ Bernard Cohen's paintings between 1960 and 1961 had different imagery sources in urban society. He created some forceful images from common places such as cinema façades, seaside architecture and designs for fireplaces.

This concern with the new urban environment provided a clear distinction from their immediate predecessors, the Middle Generation painters. The latter were affiliated with the tradition of painting - compositions, colours, textures and so on. Almost all their paintings were executed with great attention to painterly qualities. The Middle Generation artists were proud to relate their art with the artistic achievement of the Paris School artists, as shown in their paintings,

statements and organised events. When the Middle Generation abstract painters set eyes on Abstract Expressionist painting, they confined their interest to the painting itself. The young artists, by contrast, were interested in America as a whole - its high level of consumption; vigorous urban life; Hollywood film; automobiles; Coca-Cola; and skyscrapers. This enthusiasm with a broad spectrum of American life rather than mere art itself was obvious in their paintings as well as in their words.⁷⁸

Coleman and Alloway, as spokesmen for the new British abstract painting, discussed the new abstract painting in laborious relation to American art. These two critics were suspected of only concentrating on the matter or issues with reference to the Americans. The young artists never refuted the connections between them and the Americans made by the critics. One of the reasons for this was that at the time, there was the inflated claim by critics, writing in English, that American art was the latest movement in modern art and therefore the young artists were only too happy to be associated with it. In the sixties they might have believed with sincerity that they were the equal members of the movement which had already become an international phenomenon. If abstract art in Britain before 1956, represented by both constructivists and the Second Generation painters, was in the domain of a France-oriented internationalism that started in the thirties and was disrupted by the upsurge of Abstract Expressionism, then the art of the younger generation belonged to a new internationalism - an America-oriented one. The young artists were comfortable with Alloway and Coleman's policy to qualify their works by these associations, even this was excessively done from time to time.

Anthony Caro, who was included in the second *Situation* at the New London Art Gallery in 1961 at the insistence of Turnbull and who was to a large degree independent of the Alloway circle, had an even closer

relationship with the Americans. Caro was Henry Moore's assistant from 1953 to 1958. In 1959 Caro visited the United States for two months. He was impressed by works by the American sculptor David Smith and formed a friendship with Kenneth Noland and the critic Greenberg, who visited his studio in London later the same year. In 1961 Caro also became acquainted with the critic Michael Fried who was a follower of Greenberg and was working then as the London correspondent for *Arts Magazine*. In 1963 Caro developed his friendship with Jules Olitski, who was one of his colleagues at Vennington College in Vermont when both of them were teaching there. Caro's radical change in approach in sculpture started in 1960 as a result partly of the influence of David Smith and partly a realisation of the possibilities opened by Abstract Expressionist paintings of Pollock and Noland.⁷⁹ Caro indicated in 1961:

There's a fine-art quality about European art, even when it's made from junk. Americans made me see that there are no barriers and no regulations.... there's a tremendous freedom in knowing that your only limitations in a sculpture or painting are whether it carries its intentions or not, not whether it's 'Art.'⁸⁰

Caro made his first abstract sculpture *Twenty-Four Hours* as late as 1960 but his new sculpture was entirely consistent with the programmes of the main-stream *Situation* artists; its large, unconstrained, Hard-Edge and simple forms were welded together and were painted with bright colour; more significantly, it was placed on floor so that it was able to intrude the real space of the spectator.

As a late-comer, Caro won more critical appraisal from Greenberg, Fried and, to a lesser degree Alloway, than any other British artist. With the blessing of the highest critical authority, he was a major force in reviving British sculpture in the 1960s. Caro taught at the St Martin's School of Art from 1953 to 1963 and he was a focus for a group

of young sculptors there, especially in the last few years of his tenureship. Those who associated with Caro and St Martins, including David Annesley, Michael Bolus, Philip King, Tim Scott, together with the formal painters of *Situation*, became the major creative personalities of the sixties. Following Caro, the young sculptors had taken direct references from Abstract Expressionist painting to formulate their three dimensional works.

There were some other aspects of contemporary British art which were affected by the invasion of Abstract Expressionism. To mention only two issues which were rather fundamental. One was the professionalism which the British young artists started to feel strongly in the late fifties. Turnbull first felt, after he visited New York in 1957, that there was an urgency for tough-minded artist professionals in Britain.⁸¹ Alloway recognised in 1962 that 'reliable criteria of professionalism is something that occurred long since in Paris and in the 1940s in New York. In London it has been lacking....'⁸² The divided structure of English society and the hostility and indifference between generations in the London art scene had, in Alloway's opinion, militated against professionalism and had forced the younger artists to create their own mode of operation that was structured differently from the 'pastoral, bohemian and established patterns which already existed.'⁸³ Artists in the Alloway circle admired some Americans like Gottlieb, Guston or Motherwell, who adopted the image of successful man. They themselves too dressed up accordingly, in order to show their discrimination against amateurism and bohemianism. Alloway and Coleman bought their clothes at Austins, a menswear shop that imported snappy grey Dacron suits from the United States; Turnbull returned with an electric blue gangster suit from New York.⁸⁴

The young artists were, more importantly, aware of all aspects of art as business - presentation, public criticism and of course the selling of works. As they conducted themselves more professionally they required the same from their dealers, critics and collectors. Denny, for example broke with his dealer, Gimpel Fils Gallery in 1959 and started to write seriously and became involved in organising exhibitions. The most successful cases of exercising their newly acquired skills were once again *Place* and *Situation*. On both occasions artists worked together with critics and the media effectively. *Situation* was an event of considerable size and a group of disparate personalities with various aims and approaches were successfully turned into one organised body. Without mastering the necessary organising skills, they would have failed to make their voice heard and failed to draw attention from the art establishments.

The other was the issue of Oriental influence on some young artists in London. Law's move from 1960 towards rhomboid canvases arose from an idea he developed out of Zen and Gurdjieff, that the perfect only existed as an idea and therefore can only be seen through the imperfect. Hence a rhomboid evoked a perfect square by deviating from it. It was believed that an elaborate simplicity and a creative silence in Turnbull's painting were achieved through his study of Zen philosophy.⁸⁵ Marc Vaux was also enthusiastic about Zen literature and he once admitted being interested in 'the painting having or operating or helping to establish contemplative moods.'⁸⁶ There were quite a few others who had a similar interest in Oriental thought. It was the first time that such a interest was shared by a unprecedented proportion of an avant garde artist group. This interest may have been stirred up by *Modern Art from the United States* in 1956; in the introduction to the exhibition the importance of the Oriental influence on Abstract Expressionism was

emphasised. Artists stimulated by Abstract Expressionists in the exhibition may have developed an interest in the Orient thereafter.

In 1966 the British Council chose Anthony Caro, Bernard and Harold Cohen, Robyn Denny and Richard Smith to represent Britain in competition with other nations in the prestigious Venice Biennale. Although the major painting award went to the Paris-based Argentinian Julio Le Parc (painting), these British artists drew a great deal of attraction from visitors and critics. The British critic David Thompson was content that there was 'a wide consensus of opinion ... that the most balanced and serious concentration of work was to be found in the American and British Pavilions.'⁸⁷ For the paintings in *Situation* in 1960, Alan Bowness wondered 'whether such devotion to very limited ends isn't in fact verging on the point of lunacy,'⁸⁸ But he witnessed the responses of the audience at the Biennale to the sheer commitment of British artists to serious art and reported that he 'felt strongly at Venice this time that the discussion of serious matters of painting and sculptures had almost become an Anglo-American prerogative.'⁸⁹

The Biennale also prompted David Thompson to assess, in general terms, to what extent the British new art owed a debt to Abstract Expressionism. His view was that American painting 'shook British art out of its provincial habits, gave it a new awareness of scale, and new confidence in what non-figurative art was all about and what it was capable of.' So that in the sixties 'sculpture has stopped feeling a need to make surrealistic references to the human figure and painting has stopped having to refer compulsively to landscape and atmospheric space.'⁹⁰

It would be interesting if there were opinions of American critics on these British young painters. Indeed there was such an occasion a year previously, when *London: The New Scene*, an exhibition organised by

British Council, toured the Walker Arts Center, Minneapolis. The American critic Sidney Simon commented on the nature of the British art with the following words:

Unlike the successive waves of the American vanguard art, the new British art seems not to be impelled toward the point (literally) of no return.'⁹¹

Simon had got straight to the point. While British artists preferred to work near the limit of rationality but not to surpass it, the Americans were critical of such an attitude. According to Simon, the formal artists included in the exhibition - Denny, Bridget Riley and Jeremy Moon - had 'great sensuous realisation, superb finish, but no hint of radical premises strenuously pursued.'⁹² Therefore 'the rigor of Mondrian, Albers, Newman and Reinhardt, so important for toughening American Hard-Edge and Optical painting, is here relatively unfelt.'⁹³ He certainly distinguished between the two. The British artists in question had a profound respect for the making of painting which was shown in Denny's seemingly closed, static and rigidly defined paintings or in Harold Cohen's controlled but complicated displays of formal properties.

John Russell remarked in 1964 that:

To the question of 'what does New York mean to you?' most British artists would have replied 'nothing' in 1945, 'everything' in 1958 and 'something' in 1963.⁹⁴

Russell's summary may be valid only for the young generation of Bernard Cohen, Roby Denny and John Hoyland. It depicted a correct course of their development. After 1963 they all became independent as individual artists or as members of a major British movement which came out of American influences.

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- ¹ Patrick Heron, 'The ascendance of London,' *Studio International*, Dec. 1966.
- ² See Lawrence Alloway, 'Introduction,' catalogue for *Abstract Impressionism*, Arts Council, 1958. In the exhibition, he and Cohen juxtaposed de Staël, Riopelle, Guston, Joan Mitchell, Sam Francis, Masson, Tal Coat, Heron and Lanyon.
- ³ Roger Coleman, 'On Edge', *Art News and Review*, 9-23 April 1960, p. 6.
- ⁴ Graham Whitham, 'Chronology,' *The Independent Group - Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty*, The MIT Press, 1990, p. 20.
- ⁵ Lawrence Alloway, 'Illusion and Environment in Recent British Art', *Art International*, Feb. 1962, p. 38.
- ⁶ Lawrence Alloway, note to his essay 'Development of British Pop,' in Lucy Lippard ed., *Pop Art*, London, 1966, p. 200.
- ⁷ He was one of those in the ICA who managed to challenge the authority of Herbert Read. James King, *The last modern, a life of Herbert Read*, Winniefeld and Nicholson, 1989.
- ⁸ Graham Whitham, 'Chronology,' *The Independent Group - Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty*, The MIT Press, 1990, p. 32.
- ⁹ J. Reinhardt, *London: The New Scene*, Walker Art Center, 1965, p. 68.
- ¹⁰ Graham Whitham, 'William Turnbull,' *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty*, The MIT Press, 1990.
- ¹¹ E. C. Goossen, *Ellsworth Kelly*, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1973, p. 49.
- ¹² Harold Cohen, as quoted in J. Richardson, 'Introduction,' catalogue for *Harold Cohen Paintings 1960-65*, p. 9.
- ¹³ C. Meaker, *The Situation Exhibitions*, MPhil thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 1981.
- ¹⁴ Lawrence Alloway, 'Illusion and Environment in Recent British Art', *Art International*, Feb. 1962, p. 38.
- ¹⁵ J. Coplans explains: 'Jules Langsner, Los Angeles art critic, originally coined the phrase to relate common characteristics shared by the Los Angeles group of artists Mclaughlin, Feitelson, Hammersley and Benjamin in a 1958 exhibition called *Four Abstract Classicists*.' J. Coplans, *Art forum*, Jan. 1964 p. 31. In March-April 1960 the American exhibition was mounted at the ICA under the title *West Coast Hard-Edge*. (Langsner's original introduction was reprinted with a foreword by Alloway in the catalogue of the 1960 ICA show.
- ¹⁶ Roger Coleman, 'On Edge', *Art News and Review*, 9-23 April 1960, p. 6.

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- ¹⁷ Alan Bowness, 'The American Invasion and the British Response,' *Studio International*, June 1967, p. 290.
- ¹⁸ Stephen C. Foster, *The critics of Abstract Expressionism*, UM Research Press, 1976, p. 85.
- ¹⁹ Lawrence Alloway, 'English art and,' *European art this month*, Vol. 1 Sept./Oct. 1957, p. 25.
- ²⁰ Plumb had his second exhibition there in January 1959.
- ²¹ T. Maloon, 'Interview with Basil Beattie,' *Artscribe*, 24, 1980, p. 41.
- ²² Roger Coleman, 'On Edge,' *Art News and Review*, 9-23 April 1960, p. 6.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Roger Coleman, *Architectural Design*, Dec. 1959, p. 517.
- ²⁵ Michael Compton, 'Robyn Denny: Controlling the Medium,' *Studio International*, March 1973, p. 129. The other exhibitions in the series include *An Exhibit*, The ICA, 1954 and *This Is Tomorrow*, Whitechapel Gallery, 1956.
- ²⁶ R. Melville, *Architectural Review*, Dec. 1959, p. 354.
- ²⁷ Ralph Rumney, letter to Denny, Smith and Coleman, March 1959, Typescript, Robyn Denny Archive. Quoted by David Meller in his *The sixties art scene in London*, Phaidon, 1993, p. 65.
- ²⁸ Lawrence Alloway, 'Making a Scene,' *Art News and Review*, 26 Sept. 1959, p. 2.
- ²⁹ A second version, *Exhibit II*, was held at Hatton Gallery, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1957.
- ³⁰ Lawrence Alloway, text for *An Exhibit*, the ICA, August 1957.
- ³¹ Robyn Denny, 'Situation: The British Abstract Scene in 1960,' *Isis*, 6 June 1964.
- ³² Roger Coleman, 'Text for *Place*,' catalogue for *Place*, the ICA, 1959.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Lawrence Alloway, 'Size, Wise,' *Art News and Review*, Sept. 1960, p. 2.
- ³⁵ D. Thompson, *Robyn Denny*, London, 1971, p. 55.
- ³⁶ M. Compton, 'Robyn Denny: Controlling the Medium,' *Studio International*, March 1973, p. 129.
- ³⁷ Lawrence Alloway, 'Where can the young painter be seen?' *Weekly Post*, 7 Jan. 1961, p. 31.
- ³⁸ Ibid.

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- ³⁹ Lawrence Alloway, *Architectural Design*, Feb. 1961, p. 82.
- ⁴⁰ Robyn Denny, 'Situation: The British Abstract Scene in 1960,' *Isis*, 6 June 1964.
- ⁴¹ C. Meaker, *The Situation Exhibitions*, MPhil thesis, Coutauld Institute of Art, University of London, 1981, p. 38.
- ⁴² The largest work in *Situation* exhibition is Irwin's *Thornton Maximus* (12' x 16').
- ⁴³ In the front of the catalogue for *Situation* in 1960, a list of benefactors is printed. These include The Arts Council, whose representative on the executive committee was Hugh Shaw, and Austin Reed, Windsor and Newton, The Sun Engraving Company and The Kynoch Press who each gave twenty-five pounds for advertisements. The ICA has been mentioned as having offered a further twenty-five pounds if the title of the show was changed to something like 'The ICA exhibition,' but this proposition was declined.
- ⁴⁴ Lawrence Alloway, *Architectural Design*, Feb. 1961, p. 82.
- ⁴⁵ C. Meaker, *The Situation Exhibitions*, MPhil thesis, Coutauld Institute of Art, University of London, 1981.
- ⁴⁶ Robyn Denny, 'Situation: The British Abstract Scene in 1960,' *Isis*, 6 June 1964, pp. 7-8.
- ⁴⁷ Roger Coleman, Introduction to catalogue for *Situation*, the RBA Galleries, 1960.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ John Plumb, as quoted in Mervyn Levy, 'John Plumb, the gestural element,' *Studio*, Dec. 1963
- ⁵⁰ John Plumb, as quoted in Mervyn Levy, 'John Plumb, the gestural element,' *Studio*, Dec. 1963
- ⁵¹ Roger Coleman, 'Introduction,' catalogue for *Situation*, the RBA Galleries, 1960.
- ⁵² Lawrence Alloway, *Architectural Design*, Feb. 1961, p. 82.
- ⁵³ Quoted by Alloway in 'Size, Wise,' *Art News and Review*, September 1960, p. 2.
- ⁵⁴ Alloway, *Architectural Design*, Feb. 1961, p. 83.
- ⁵⁵ Robyn Denny, 'Situation: The British Abstract scene in 1960,' *Isis*, 6 June 1964, pp. 7-8.
- ⁵⁶ Roger Coleman, Introduction to catalogue for *Situation*.
- ⁵⁷ Lawrence Alloway, 'American new paintings,' *Quardrum*, 1959.

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- ⁵⁸ Roger Coleman, 'On edges,' *Art News and Review*, April 9-23, 1960, p. 6.
- ⁵⁹ Lawrence Alloway, 'Size, wise,' *Art News and Review*, 10-24 Sept.. 1960, p. 2.
- ⁶⁰ P. Rawstorne, 'They put human emotions on canvas,' *News Chronicle*, 9 Sept. 1960, p. 6.
- ⁶¹ D. Sylvester, *New Statesman*, 10 Sept. 1960, p. 337.
- ⁶² Lawrence Alloway, 'Size, wise,' *Art News and Review*, 10-24 Sept. 1960, p. 2.
- ⁶³ Ibid.
- ⁶⁴ Lawrence Alloway, 'Illusion and environment in recent British Art', *Art International*, Feb. 1962, p. 38.
- ⁶⁵ R. Morphet, *William Turnbull sculpture and painting*, Tate Gallery, 1973.
- ⁶⁶ Roger Coleman, 'On edges,' *Art News and Review*, April 9-23, 1960, p. 6.
- ⁶⁷ Lawrence Alloway, 'Illusion and environment in recent British art', *Art International*, Feb. 1962, p. 38.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 39.
- ⁶⁹ Roger Coleman, 'John Plumb,' *Arts Review*, July 1961, p. 11.
- ⁷⁰ The most extreme example of this was the piece of writing about *Situation in Isis* in 1964 which was an attempt to link *Situation* painting with 'the classical tradition of abstract painting.' J. Gorddard, 'Isis reviews developments in abstract painting,' *Isis*, 1468, 6 June 1964.
- ⁷¹ Lawrence Alloway, 'Situation in retrospect.' *Architectural Design*, Feb. 1961 p. 83.
- ⁷² Lawrence Alloway, 'Illusion and environment in recent British art', *Art International*, Feb. 1962, p. 39.
- ⁷³ Lawrence Alloway, 'Introduction,' catalogue for *Gillian Ayres*, Molton Gallery, 1960.
- ⁷⁴ H. Mundy, 'Effects used in painting', *Gazette*, 2, 1961, p. 1.
- ⁷⁵ Interview with Mervyn Levy, *Studio*, Feb. 1964.
- ⁷⁶ Bob Law in conversation with Richard Cork in *10 Black Paintings 1965-70*, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1974.
- ⁷⁷ Gordon House, 'Permutations,' *Gazette*, No. 2, 1961. n/p.
- ⁷⁸ A notorious case was Robyn Denny's open letter to John Minton.

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- ⁷⁹ Detailed account in Charles Harrison, 'Sculpture's recent past,' Terry A. Neff, ed., *A Quiet Revolution*, Thames and Hudson, 1987, pp. 13-15.
- ⁸⁰ Anthony Caro, in Lawrence Alloway, 'Interview with Anthony Caro,' *Gazette* (London), No. 1, 1961, p. 1.
- ⁸¹ David Meller, *The sixties art scene in London*, Phaidon, 1993, p. 77.
- ⁸² Lawrence Alloway, 'Illusion and environment in recent British art', *Art International*, Feb. 1962, p.38.
- ⁸³ Ibid.
- ⁸⁴ David Meller, *The sixties art scene in London*, Phaidon, 1993, p. 77.
- ⁸⁵ Norbert Lynton, *Art Inglese Oggi 1960-76*, p.32. Turnbull encountered Eastern literature much earlier than his 1962 visits to Japan and South East Asia, see R. Morphet, *William Turnbull Sculpture and Painting*, The Tate Gallery, 1973, p. 58.
- ⁸⁶ Vaux interviewed by Mealer, note 133.
- ⁸⁷ David Thompson, 'Reflections on the Biennale II,' *Studio International*, Aug. 1966.
- ⁸⁸ Alan Bowness, 'Reflection on the Biennale II,' *Studio International*, Aug. 1966.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid.
- ⁹⁰ David Thompson, 'Venice Biennale: the British five,' *Studio International*, June 1966, p. 237.
- ⁹¹ Sidney Simon, 'A review of *London: The New Scene*,' *Art News*, April 1965, p. 64.
- ⁹² Ibid.
- ⁹³ Sidney Simon, 'A review of *London: The New Scene*,' *Art News*, April 1965, p. 64.
- ⁹⁴ John Russell, *Art in America*, No. 2, 1964, p. 74.

Chapter 6

THE CRITICAL RESPONSE

Before Abstract Expressionist painting was widely seen in Britain there had been a few articles that dealt with, or included, Abstract Expressionism in British publications. Early important works could be found in *Horizon*, where both Greenberg's article the 'American Painting on the Horizon' and Denys Sutton's 'The Challenge of American Art' were published, in 1947 and 1949 respectively. David Sylvester's review of the 1950 Venice Biennale, in which America was represented by Pollock, Motherwell and Kline, prompted an angry reaction from Greenberg. Until now only a small section of the art community in Britain knew, or paid attention to, what was happening in the United States. It was not until the exhibition *Modern Art from the United States* in 1956, that enormous interest in American contemporary art was stirred up among British artists and critics. The publications on the American art scene, on Abstract Expressionism in particular, increased dramatically and they were scattered in newspapers, periodicals and exhibition catalogues. These British publications were accessible to a wide British readership.

Much of the writing at this stage was journalism without critical criteria in which most authors detached Abstract Expressionism from its cultural context. There was a tendency to treat Abstract Expressionism in rather strict formal terms that reflected the political and cultural situation in Britain. In France and Italy, where communists had a prominent role in political and cultural life, Abstract Expressionism confronted an art world dominated by realism, but the situation in Britain was different. Rhetoric and terms used by the Americans, like 'anti-communism' and those used by the French left, like 'American imperialism,' seemed to have no place in Britain before 1966, when Heron

began to protest at the chauvinism of certain American art critics. The discussion about contemporary art in Britain was less politically orientated, focusing on the evolution and autonomy of art itself. The few British commentators who did argue in political terms, never won a prominent position.¹

A survey of the early critical responses reveals an initial acceptance of Abstract Expressionism based on Rosenberg's assumption; Abstract Expressionist painting revolutionised the entire idea of painting. It was not until the critical battle between Rosenberg and Greenberg moved in Greenberg's favour, towards the end of the fifties, that Greenberg's ideas predominated in Britain.

Patrick Heron and Lawrence Alloway were major commentators who had contributed much of their output to Abstract Expressionism; they were also the most influential critics of the avant garde artist groups of the time. It must be stressed that, although their criticism bears the general characteristics stated above, its primary concern was with the discussion of contemporary British art rather than of Abstract Expressionism itself. So that their respective critical criteria were affected by contemporary concerns rather than by an obligation to an objective interpretation of a particular American school of painting.

As the information about the new painting in America had been limited in Britain before the *Modern Art from the United States* exhibition at the Tate Gallery in 1956, the majority of British critics were not interested in nor aware of its progress in the United States. Even Heron, who was already very active in the scene, found difficulties in understanding it. For example, Heron once compared Pollock's spilling and dripping of paint as a natural, precise and exquisite 'record of the laws of movement,' similar to the marks left on a wall by a passing lorry.² Alloway revealed in his review of the all-important exhibition in the Tate in 1956, just how unprepared were his peer critics in Britain:

...If the works of art on view can be mastered by the English public it will be a good first step. However, even if the public are sympathetic there are difficulties: British art critics may not be too much help. I am writing before all the weekly periodicals are out but already Basil Taylor thinks that Sam Francis is a founder of American non-figurative art and T. W. Earp believes there is a painter named Pollack (sic) and another one called N. Spender (the latter perpetuating a misprint in the catalogue for Spencer). There have been, too, errors of perspective.... These errors are small but symptomatic: our critics would not be found making similar mistakes about English watercolorists or Victorian narrative painting.³

These mistakes would not have any chance if the critics cited were dealing with contemporary art in Britain or in France, or even in Germany. The British critics' eyes had not yet looked beyond the contemporary art at the core of Europe. In fact they were just not ready to accept contemporary art from a distant country at that time.

The amount of writing about Abstract Expressionism increased dramatically during the aftermath of the *Modern Art from the United States* at the Tate. Abstract Expressionism appeared suddenly and at a glance looked very different from the main stream of modern European painting to which the British had been accustomed. Its closest European equivalent was the Art Informale painting which was only exposed in London on a couple of occasions. Abstract Expressionism seemed to the British to be an offshoot of European modern art but, strange and ill-directed.

In these early days, British critics seemed to lack critical criteria as well as confidence in American art although they had now heard the excessive claims made by American critics for this new movement. Those who were tolerant could only express their view ambiguously. The anonymous critic for *The Times*, for example, paid

special attention to the Abstract Expressionist paintings in the *Modern Art from the United States* exhibition but he could only loosely define these paintings. Nevertheless, he recognised that they might 'result in some important consequence in Britain.'⁴

During the short period between 1956 and 1958 most of the critics working for mass circulated newspapers and magazines rejected Abstract Expressionism, for various reasons. John Russell of *The Sunday Times*, entitled his review on the 1956 American exhibition as 'Yankee Doodles' and his reaction to the huge Pollocks was reminiscent of Ruskin's reaction to Whistler's *Night of Bridge*:

But the greatest of these great swells is Jackson Pollock, for whom no praise can, in certain quarters, be too high. I will not say that I was prejudiced against Mr. Pollock's picture by the fact that he made it by pouring the paint on to a flat canvas out of a can and later (I quote from authority) 'slapping the huge canvas with his own paint covered hands.'⁵

Russell misunderstood Abstract Expressionist painting at a fundamental level when he ended his article by implying that it was not art in a 'department of the humanities.'⁶ It was a few years later he made the apology that he applied conventional aesthetics to Abstract Expressionist painting in 1956.⁷

John Berger was the only major British critic with a overwhelmingly political and left-wing disposition and he was at that moment committing himself to an international realist movement. Berger's review of the Tate exhibition started with an accusation of America's role as the world policeman. He claimed that as the Americans deceived themselves in political matters so American critics were inclined to do the same when dealing with art. Therefore American critics' claims on Abstract Expressionist painting had no substance. While Berger praised the 'impressive' works by the realists Ben Shahn, Edward Hopper, and

Feininger, he was not happy with the catalogue and presentation of the exhibition which gave too much weight to Abstract Expressionist paintings. For him such painting was guilty of abandoning completely any 'conscious thought' or 'intention' and of reducing painting to the sole business of mark-making and therefore:

.... For their own sake these slashed, scratched, dribbled-upon, violated canvases would not be worth taking seriously.⁸

With such vigorous objection, he was bitterly disappointed by the 'disturbing fact' that 'many intelligent, talented people do take them seriously.'⁹

Support for the Americans was to be found in the pages of a few professional publications like *Architectural Review* and *Art News and Review*. A few critics should be mentioned, apart from Heron and Alloway whom we will discuss later. Robert Melville, the critic for *Architectural Review*, felt tangibly the extent of the impact from America on Europe that 'ambitious attempts to understand and absorb this new kind of painting are being made in every art-centre in Western Europe.'¹⁰ Since he was as short of terminology on the subject as those who basically opposed it, Melville had to adopt the literature of the Americans. Against the hostility towards Abstract Expressionist painting by many British critics, which was 'insulting and insensitive' in his words, Melville approved Abstract Expressionist painting with words such as 'breakthrough' - his tone was similar to that of Greenberg. He was trying to reconcile the explanation by Greenberg with that by Rosenberg:

... The breakthrough by the Americans was that they think of canvas not only as a physical support but as an impenetrable plane, but in their case this acknowledgement of the flat reality of the canvas goes hand in hand with an

attitude to the act of painting that is dictated by the physical fact that paint operates as a coating.¹¹

Melville recognised that one of the achievements made by Abstract Expressionism was that it 'effectively liquidated iconographical problems,' an idea he shared with Alloway. As he regarded abstraction itself as an important principle, he dismissed Pollock's early figurative painting (*She Wolf* 1943 in the Tate exhibition) for it was 'neat, lifeless and conventional.'¹² He failed to see the intrinsic relationship between Pollock's early work and his later mature style.¹³ Melville also rejected de Kooning on the same ground.¹⁴

Pierre Rouve, a contributor to *Art News and Review*, was a rare critic who had realised the danger of accepting the ideas of Rosenberg after he witnessed an immediate wave of imitation of Abstract Expressionist painting. He felt the necessity to stress the importance of form in painting, even in Abstract Expressionist painting. In a review of two simultaneous exhibitions, the *Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Collection* at Tate Gallery, and the *Painting from the Musée d'Art Moderne* in Paris at R.B.A. Gallery, which consisted of mainly Abstract Expressionist paintings and the French Art Informale paintings, Rove argued that form was not only the credential of creative coherence, but was also the essence of any visual communication that would be more than a mere optical excitement. Without formal control, painting can only lead to chaos. Chaos produced results which may have a significant place in psychology and sociology, but chance and chaos were the denial of the artist as a creative agent. While he agreed that complex reverberation of the subconscious and the total denial of the conventional beauty were necessary to the regeneration of form, he insisted regeneration was the very opposite of destruction.¹⁵ Rove was copiously reiterating here Read's ideas about Surrealist automatism. At the time Read himself was, however, attempting to identify Abstract Expressionism as the successor

of the 'unimpeded expression of the artist's temperament,' as opposed to the 'casual mess' anyone could make.¹⁶

Rouve was one of the few critics who recognised the connection between Abstract Expressionism and Surrealism. Unlike Denys Sutton, who had lived in New York for a number of years and compared Abstract Expressionism to metaphysical Surrealism in his 'The Challenge of American Art,' Rouve found their correlation in their power of provocation.¹⁷

A furious dispute provoked by Alloway's review of *American New Painting* at the Tate in 1959 seemed to have marked an end of the uncertainty and dispute over the status of Abstract Expressionism. Since then the explicit opposition had almost vanished in British media. Whether or not Abstract Expressionism had established itself a position in the history of art, it had certainly gained momentum. Quite a few well-known critics changed their stance in this matter. John Russell noticeably gave a favourable review to *New American Painting* which amounted to a withdrawal of his view in 1956. Russell recognised that the qualities of Abstract Expressionist painting derived from both American and European traditions, and discussed their work using terms such as 'fearlessness' and 'intensity.'¹⁸ ¹⁹ On the occasion of the Rothko exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1961 Russell praised him generously:

Most rare, mysterious and not to be missed is the experience which greets the visitor to the Mark Rothko exhibition. And although each is an independent work, they add up in ensemble to a view of human nature which is as various as it is unified....Rothko...has perfected a formal device within whose simplicity architecture upon architecture lies hid. For these are not mere decorative panels or sumptuous washes of evocative colour; they are dramas, of which the note varies from heroic energy to the resignation of the spent heart...."²⁰

David Sylvester, who once dismissed Abstract Expressionist painting as inferior imitation of European modern painting in 1950, showed a reversed attitude in his 1959 review of the Rothko exhibition:

....These paintings are beyond poetry as they are beyond picture-making.These paintings begin and end with a intense and utterly direct expression of feeling through the interaction of coloured areas of a certain size. They are the complete fulfilment of Van Gogh's notion of using colour to convey man's passions. They are the realization of what abstract artists have dreamed for 50 years of doing - making painting as inherently expressive as music.²¹

In general Abstract Expressionism was perceived as largely a phenomenon of anti-art or non-art, corresponding to the theory of Rosenberg that Abstract Expressionism had broken the boundaries between traditional pictorial art and performance. Such reasoning was exhibited explicitly in the series of discussion of relationship between life and art on Radio 3 in late 1959. Basil Taylor, a London critic, attempted to explain Abstract Expressionism, in the light of Rosenberg's theory, as a consequence of Dada and Surrealism.

It seems that, when Abstract expressionism attained a prominent place in Europe, the majority of British critics ceased to be hostile to it. Instead they stressed the European origins of Abstract Expressionism. Taylor was fitting Abstract Expressionism into the same anti-art category as Dada, Futurism and Surrealism. These movements had many features in common, according to Taylor. Their most important characteristic was an involvement with political ideas and movements; the spirit of anti-art has always involved explicit or implicit comments on political events by either 'word or deed.'²² Based on the idea that Abstract Expressionism was an avant garde tendency with a political orientation and that it ridiculed the idea of art as an object, Taylor argued that the concept of

'event,' as used by Rosenberg, was not new and action painting was a continuation of what had existed in Europe for a long time. The notion of 'event' was inherited by Surrealism from those early anti-art movements. Breton rubbed a picture by Picabia in front of the public demonstrating a typical 'event.' Abstract Expressionism followed the same tradition:

... it is for this reason, if no other, that I think one must see action painting as at least a linked phenomenon in modern art. Action painting has given us painting as events. It has exhibited works that leave upon the canvas the very image by which they have been made.'²³

Another perceived characteristic was their attempt to 'break down the immobility of the work of art and of the image.'²⁴ There was a consistent effort to animate European painting since Monet's day, as Taylor observed:

in the nineteenth century Impressionists had recognised that what brings the most intense vicarious experience of life and nature is motion, And the whole movement of anti-art has been marked by this continuing contest with immobility.²⁵

Taylor's view was echoed by other participants of the discussion, for example, Reyner Banham added more anti-art precedents:

There is an extraordinary phrase of Boccioni's where he identified as his own the characteristics which we attributed to action painting: 'Gesture, for us...will decisively be dynamic sensation eternalized as such'.

The phrase accurately identifies the kinaesthetic quality of the paint-trails in a painting by Pollock or Mathieu; we recognized the fact, and saluted Boccioni as a forerunner²⁶

The remaining opposition could not accept Abstract Expressionism even under Rosenberg's terms. Their concerns about painting in general

were reactionary and intolerant. When he reported to the readers of *Art News and Review* the arrival of *New American Painting* in Europe in the summer of 1958 the critic Roditi was not yet prepared to welcome the exhibition and looked for any opportunity to attack Abstract Expressionism or America in general. Roditi discovered that, of the seventeen artists in the show, Arshile Gorky, Philip Guston, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko and Jack Tworkov were all born outside the United States; while William Baziotes and Theodoes Stamos, though born in America, were both of purely Greek immigrant extraction. It was more than just a pity that there was 'a distinct shortage of native-born American talent.'²⁷

Heron and Alloway did most to promote Abstract Expressionism in Britain. Although these two could not be more different in critical approach as well as in their interest in art in general, as participants of avant garde art movements in the fifties they had dealt with Abstract Expressionism in response to needs of their own and those of the artist groups they supported.

The tone of Heron's writing on Abstract Expressionism may have varied on occasions but his formalistic perspective remained the same. His sustaining critical stance was decided by his unique role as a major avant garde painter and art critic. And thus, in his writing, knowledge of past and current art was interlaced with a painter's sensitivity. On the one hand, Heron's criticism of Abstract Expressionism was closely related to the state of the development of his own painting and, to a lesser extent, to his defence of the Middle Generation painters as a whole. On the other hand, Heron had the capacity to produce lavish formal description and analysis of painting.

His review of the *Opposing Force* exhibition at the ICA Gallery in 1953 was his earliest verbal response to any works by Pollock (indeed to the only one drip painting in the exhibition) he had ever seen. On this occasion Heron simply dismissed the painting on the grounds that it lacked the sensibility which could only come from a painter's hand and brush, not the action of dripping paints. For Heron painting with brush was more intimately controlled by hand than pouring paint from a certain distance:

And Pollock is the inventor of a method now famous: the picture is made by pouring quick-drying paint onto a horizontal canvas from tins. The result is as mechanical as the method. Though sometimes promising drama, such works lack the personal nervous vibration a brush may impart but poured liquid denies.²⁸

Heron was not convinced at the time of any significance in Abstract Expressionism and still kept his eyes on Paris, when he complained 'why give us these when the best non-figurative painters in Paris remain virtually unknown here.'²⁹

1954-55 was an important period in which Heron dramatically changed his view of the contemporary sentiment in painting. In August 1954, Heron met Greenberg for the first time and found that they had much in common in terms of critical approach; their conversation was, according to Heron, focused on Pollock.³⁰ In December of the same year, Heron passionately criticised the Tate Gallery for its non-possession of the 'important' works by contemporary Americans including Pollock, Tobey, Rothko and Motherwell. It formed a sharp contrast to his stance in the review of the *Opposing Forces* at the ICA less than two years previously.³¹ At roughly the same time Heron started a thorough meditation about his own painting: he was about to abandon figurative elements for good.

Heron's change of attitude escalated after he had seen the Tobey exhibition at the ICA in 1955 and the Abstract Expressionist paintings in *Modern Art from the United States* in 1956. It was the first time that he and most of his contemporaries, were exposed to sizeable Abstract Expressionist painting of good quality. Heron was overwhelmed by the vitality of Abstract Expressionist painting which appeared absent in paintings by British and European artists. He was impressed at once by the 'size' and 'energy' of works by Pollock and de Kooning:

I was instantly elated by the size, energy, originality, economy and inventive daring of many of the paintings. Their creative emptiness represented a radical discovery, I felt, as did their flatness or rather, their spatial shallowness. I was fascinated by their consistent denial of illusionistic depth, which goes against all my own instinct as a painter.

.....These American painters were so direct in the execution of the idea that their paint gestures, their statement on the canvas, had an almost over-dry immaculateness....³²

It was a painter's instinctive response to a kind of art that was against his own instinct as a painter, and thus it reflected truly the vitality of many Abstract Expressionist paintings. As long as he went as usual into formal analysis, however, Heron criticised most of them for these very qualities that initially impressed him. Although Heron readily agreed with Greenberg's idea that Abstract Expressionism was a breakthrough from Cubism, some characteristics of these paintings, such as the 'transparent veil effect' in Pollock's painting, he considered totally undesirable.³³ Heron was also critical of de Kooning's symmetry that had, for Heron, breached the laws of composition:

..... The centrally-placed figure (Heron refers to *Women 1* 1951-52), presented in terms of a most original and daring scissoring of buckled planes, is nonetheless too central. Lines of force radiate outward, only to be rejected, not accommodated

by the four edges of the canvas, thus the areas adjacent to the picture's edges are chaotic, vacuous, unused pictorially.³⁴

Heron was one of the few English critics practising formalist criticism at the time. Roger Fry's essays on Cézanne and Matisse had a profound influence on Heron. Heron's criticism on a wide range of contemporary art was always with an emphasis on issues about form - colour, composition and space - and he was enthusiastic about description and analysis of painting. Heron's discussion of the American new painting always centred on the paintings themselves. It was a real difficulty that he, on one hand, admired the Americans for their unconventional manner in painting and on the other he applied the set of critical criteria which the American artists had aimed to break.

Abstract Expressionist painting was extreme, especially in Rosenberg's interpretation. Heron simply could not appreciate it by the criteria he had applied in his previous writing. Heron rationalised his response to Abstract Expressionism, perhaps with the help of Greenberg's theory, in another important article in 1958:

The extent of their break with French painting, both in their shallow depth, as a working possibility for communicating a new kind of pictorial space, and in their rejection of a European sensibility in questions of *matière*.

...

Their paint had a rawness, their execution a brashness, their design a lack of contrapuntal complexity, which all indicated a new kind of energy and inventiveness. But more important still, their painting was evident of a total freedom not only from figuration, but even from abstraction which somehow still evoked familiar visual facts, whether of still life or landscape.³⁵

Heron emphasised in the review that four out of five painters in the exhibition lacked 'sensuous subtlety of tone colour' and 'subtle

asymmetry of shape.'³⁶ This he attributed to a 'rigid concept of what freedom should look like in painting.'³⁷ Colour or the co-relationship between colours was one of Heron's major concerns throughout his career as painter. Heron was not satisfied with the way most of Abstract Expressionist painters used colour. Heron used Monet to make his point. Tonal colour was best applied by Monet and colour in a Monet was a result of his intensive studies of nature:

...Monet was essentially an 'impressionist', one whose every gesture grew out of the lifelong study of light as it is absorbed, refracted and transmitted in the atmosphere. For him, one touch of Naples yellow placed between two of cobalt violet is not only a statement of 'violet-yellow-violet' - as would be the case of in a non-figurative colourist of today. It was also the conveyor of an optical sensation concerning the light of the setting sun as it was reflected between two small waves of the evening sea.³⁸

Most of the Abstract Expressionists seemed to have ignored the inherent relation between colours.

His growing dissatisfaction with these aspects of Abstract Expressionist painting led him to think, as some others did too, that Abstract Expressionism was American's first and at the same time the last contribution to modern painting. Abstract painting in the hands of Pollock had gone to its extreme and it must advance in a new direction. Heron was considering abstract painting after Abstract Expressionism:

The visible speed with which Pollock registered an impulse has proved a feat as infectious as anything from the hand of Picasso. And it had served to hog Western painting out of its post-Picasso coma. But now what we desperately need are examples of a new and fine deliberatedness: a more fully conscious and considered mode of action, which will embrace the static and fundamentally architectural elements in painting at the same time that it displays the fluent and spontaneous.³⁹

Heron's vision of the future of abstract painting took shape inevitably against Abstract Expressionism. It must be a synthesis of the 'passionate quietness,' 'sensuous intellectuality' and physically delectable means of Bonnard and Matisse with the brutal directness of statement, slightly boring shallowness of the spatial scheme, and the spontaneity of American painting. As the initial impact on Heron was from the gestural paintings, he treated Rothko as secondary in his review in 1956, although Heron felt that Rothko was perhaps more important as an 'explorer' who was 'discovering things never before known.'⁴⁰ Rothko's importance was increased now in 1958. A promising direction existed already within Abstract Expressionism itself, in Rothko, Motherwell and Still:

If non-figurative painting is to survive...it must look beyond the harsh and spatially limited world of Pollock and of the formally amorphous Kandinsky.... If American painting can still help us all in our search forward it is the quieter painters, Rothko, Motherwell, and Still, for example, who are most relevant, perhaps.... Out of us strident freedom must now grow structures of classical weight and beauty: the profoundly considered must now be permitted to glow where only the rawness of the 'spontaneous' has to be allowed. 'Spontaneity' has become a disease!⁴¹

It was at this time that Heron developed an idea from one of his early essays on Bonnard in 1947, in which He observed Bonnard's innovative arrangement of objects in his painting; the four edges of many Bonnard's paintings were the first four formal statements and the areas close to them were pictorially most active. Careful use of edges would lead to a well balanced asymmetrical composition. In 1958 this was emphasised in contrary to the symmetry treatises of many Abstract Expressionist paintings. Heron later claimed that he and other Middle Generation painters were consciously exploring the potential of the areas

on canvas adjacent to its four edges, in the late fifties. He also claimed that this experiment with composition had had a central importance as it influenced abstract painting in the United States in the sixties.

In 1958 Heron decided to abandon critical writing altogether - he only resumed it after almost ten years in 1966. In all Heron's criticism about Abstract Expressionism in the few crucial years in the fifties, he confined his argument in terms of the strict discipline of painting. He was never interested in the subject-matter of Abstract Expressionist painting.

Lawence Alloway came to the notice of the public in 1954 when he published his first book, *Nine Abstract Artists*. Alloway substantially differentiated two major groups of artists in post-war British abstract art. While he depicted the constructivists as pursuing a 'strategy of purity' by totally banishing external imagery and working in a systematic, often mathematical mode, he started to use the new terminology from American to define works by some Middle Generation artists - Frost, Scott, Hilton, (Davie, not included in this volume, was also referred to). These artists were still in the vein of platonic geometry but they shared a tendency in 'irrational expression' which in the new American terminology was 'expressionistic action painting.'⁴²

By early 1956, when *Modern Painting from the United States* was on show at the Tate Gallery, Abstract Expressionism was subject to his intense observation. His published writing between 1956 and 1961, when he moved to the United States, was largely concerned with Abstract Expressionism, although his more profound interest was in popular culture. His articles were scattered in *Architectural Design*, *Art News and Review*, *The Listener* and in many exhibition catalogues.

It was mainly Rosenberg's 'American Action Painters' of 1952 that provided Alloway with the framework to introduce Abstract Expressionism to his English audience. 'A term suggested by Harold Rosenberg for the new kind of art is "action painting,"' Alloway reiterated, 'Painting is defined as the sum of the artist's actions with his materials, not the results of sensations translated into paint or of an ideal of form....'⁴³ Alloway accepted this critical interpretation of Abstract Expressionism for the time being; for instance, in his review of *Modern Art from the United States*:

... the heroic phase of action painting, ..., is represented by Pollock's *Number 1*, De Kooning's *Painting*, and Kline's *Chief*. Common to these three artists is a definition of art as gesture with materials.⁴⁴

While *Modern Art from the United States* allowed the British to have access to a good number of Abstract Expressionist paintings for the first time, Alloway felt immediately a certain universality in the visual statements of Abstract Expressionist painting:

Also visual art is basically affected by its environment it has wider currency than other forms of communication. Therefore, visitors to the Tate Gallery we look at De Kooning, Pollock, Kline, Still, Rothko, will be faced by the art of a new aesthetic which, though it is the product of a different culture than ours⁴⁵

Relying on Rosenberg's theory again, Alloway differentiated between European painting and the new American painting. According to Alloway, works by the Abstract Expressionists were not aesthetic objects but something else beyond the conceived word 'art,' unlike European contemporary painting which still tend to:

... turn action into connoisseurship, making a fetish of quality which the original American avoided. There is a world of difference between using materials to record an action and using materials sensuously for the appraisal of well-trained connoisseurs.⁴⁶

What in Abstract Expressionist painting appealed to Alloway was the equation between 'technique and action' and the 'foundation of an iconography capable of repetition, without, however, destroying the early freedom.'⁴⁷ Abstract Expressionists did not intend to paint a picture according to pre-existing ideas but that the paintings were a product that resulted from the activity of its making. Rosenberg was again in Alloway's mind when he wrote that the 'tracks of these actions are not primarily decorative but charged with the humanity of the man who makes them.'⁴⁸ As Alloway's writing frequently appeared in British publications and after 1958 in *Art International*, Greenberg was possibly right to lay the blame on Alloway for spreading Rosenberg's ideas in Europe.⁴⁹

As a European, Alloway seemed determined to mix Abstract Expressionism with similar trends in Europe, the Art Informale and the Cobra Group, between 1957 and 1958. It was mainly his efforts that resulted in the exhibitions including *New Trend in Painting* in 1957 and *Some Paintings from the E. J. Power Collection* and *Abstract Impressionism*, both in 1958. In these exhibitions he drew together artists as diverse as Heron, Ivon Hitchens, André Masson, Philip Guston, Sam Francis, Moynihan, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Bernard and Harold Cohen, and Richard Smith. The similarity between the paintings by these painters was, for Alloway, no more than the painterly quality of execution, as various terms associated with them suggested - tachisme, action painting ('other art' was Alloway's own ambiguous term). Although the British and School of Paris abstract painter 'tends to be more formal than the American.'⁵⁰

An obvious change in his understanding of Abstract Expressionist painting took place after Alloway went to America and visited dozens of cities in the United States in 1958. The first hand contact with the Americans, as he visited many of the major Abstract Expressionists, may have been the cause of this change. On returning from the United States, Alloway published three articles - one on cities and urban culture in the USA, originally a lecture at the ICA; the second was a lengthy catalogue introduction to Pollock's exhibition at Tooth's Gallery; the third reviewed the touring Pollock retrospective exhibition at Whitechapel Art Gallery, in which Alloway began to criticise Rosenberg.

Alloway questioned the very name of 'action painting' for the first time:

Although 'action' was a good word to stress the importance of the creative action of the artist, it has been mistaken as a full description of the art instead of recognized for what it is, a polemical, melodramatic label. What I needed to discover was that action was not the end result but a process in the discovery of aesthetic order.⁵¹

Alloway also worked on putting right a misconception, which derived from the interpretation of Rosenberg, that the Abstract Expressionist painters worked in a way involved with no formal concern. Alloway saw the chaotic appearance of Pollock's gestural paintings differently now:

This conspicuous play with paint as a physical substance has been seen in Europe but not the control tasks which the artists invented to keep pace with the technical innovations. Pollock's skeins of paint, for example, rarely spill over the edge of the canvas.⁵²

This point was stressed with more details and examples in a slightly later article on Pollock. In Pollock's painting, Alloway discerned, 'the sequence from tangle to a kind of classic poise and thence to a Herculean

assertion of order, all on a basis of improvisation, follows a natural curve.'⁵³

At approximately the same time Alloway engaged himself with a new notion on space in painting. 'Space' in painting was of such importance that it was 'a key word in post-war art, as form was a key word of early 20th century aesthetic.' Alloway was particularly referring to the implication of space in large sized canvas of Abstract Expressionist painting:

The American contribution to radical art in this sense is particularly to be seen in the big picture. As is generally known, many of the key works of the period are large. Such works are intended to be seen not from a distance, like an altar-piece or a fresco, but from fairly close up. You can see this from the studios in which the paintings are produced.⁵⁴

Alloway now discussed Pollock in this context:

... Pollock's space came the only way it could, forwards, rising from the sensual ridges and pools of paint. His pictures appear to advance into our space rather than invite us into theirs. This enveloping space-effect, felt most strongly in front of the big pictures, has made some difference to the optimum point from which large pictures are habitually viewed. Instead of stepping back to see how the whole is contained, it is often aesthetically better to forward and experience the expansion of the picture in one's visual field.⁵⁵

The achievement of the Americans from their way of dealing with large sized canvases had fundamentally revolutionised the spatial relationship between spectators and painting and it was necessarily a modern experience:

It has been an ideal of modern art, European as well as America, to destroy the rectangle of the picture plane and give the spectator a direct experience of space. The big picture at

last achieves this by immersing the spectator, making him aware of the surface rather than of the edges of the work. Intimacy and involvement are achieved by size, as in the large-screen movie techniques, such as CinemaScope. This feeling has been hard to experience in England because not enough large works by the artists have been seen here.⁵⁶

To draw together Abstract Expressionist painting with mass media was in accordance with Alloway's long standing notion of the Pop-Fine Art continuum. It represented a pluralistic view that was realised from his observation of contemporary society:

Acceptance of the mass media entails a shift in our notion of what culture is. Instead of reserving the word for the highest artifacts and the noblest thoughts of history's top ten, it needs to be used more widely as the description of 'what a society does,' then, unique oil painting and highly personal poems as well as mass-distributed films and group aimed magazines can be placed within a continuum rather than frozen in layers in a pyramid.⁵⁷

Here, in 1959, Alloway attempted to break the hierarchy in culture as defined in Greenberg's early writing, 'Avant-garde and Kitsch.' For Alloway, the 'abundance of twentieth century communications' was 'an embarrassment to the traditionally educated custodian of culture....'⁵⁸ The correlated notions of spatial communication, spatial intimacy and perceptual ambiguity, had central importance in the new British abstract art of the early sixties. Alloway had played an important role in identifying the objectives of the movement.

Alloway was a controversial figure and seemed to enjoy being in the centre of controversy. His aggressive manner in criticism often caused trouble. On the occasion of *New American Painting* exhibition at the Tate in 1959, Alloway castigated his contemporary critics for their indifference and ignorance of the new American painting and ridiculed his

peer critics by citing their mistakes in print. Perhaps it was his manner, rather than his pro-American attitude, which provoked anger and an 'hysterical reaction.'⁵⁹ Far from squashing Alloway, his fellow critics had in fact 'engendered hero worship for him and his outspoken article among the younger generation.'⁶⁰

Generally speaking, Alloway's approaches were eclectic and sometimes opportunistic. He had certainly, though, compared with Heron, brought with him a broad-spectrum of concerns into his arguments about contemporary art, in which Abstract Expressionism was predominant. Alloway's writing indeed in many ways reflected the wider concerns of a new post-war society and its arts.

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- ¹ John Berger's argument for social realist art was a failure as the general concern of the British public was different from that of the French and the Italian. It was only in the late seventies that his work showed significance in a new social and political context.
- ² Patrick Heron, *The Changing Forms of Art*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955, pp. xiii-xiv.
- ³ Lawrence Alloway, 'U.S. modern paintings,' *Art News and Review*, January 21, 1956, p. 2.
- ⁴ *The Times*, 5 January 1956.
- ⁵ John Russell, 'Yankee doodles,' *The Sunday Times*, 8 January 1956.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ John Russell, *The Sunday Times*, March 8, 1959, p. 23.
- ⁸ John Berger, 'The battle,' *New Statesman & Nation*, Vol. LI, No. 1298, 21 January 1956, p. 70.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Robert Melville, *Architectural Review*, Vol. 119 No. 742, May 1956, p. 268.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Robert Melville, *Architectural Review*, Vol. 119 No. 742, May 1956, p. 268.
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 267.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p. 268.
- ¹⁵ Pierre Rouse, 'Modern, more modern, most modern,' *Art News and Review*, April 27, 1957, p. 9.
- ¹⁶ Herbert Read, 'An inner necessity,' *Quadrant* I, 1956, p. 8.
- ¹⁷ Denys Sutton, 'The challenge of American art,' *Horizon*, 118, Oct. 1949, p. 284.
- ¹⁸ John Russell, *The Sunday Times*, March 8, 1959, p. 23
- ¹⁹ Although Alloway gave him an unforgiving comment. Lawrence Alloway, in 'Sic, sic, sic,' *Art News and Review*, March 1959.
- ²⁰ John Russell, *Sunday Times*, 15 Oct. 1961.
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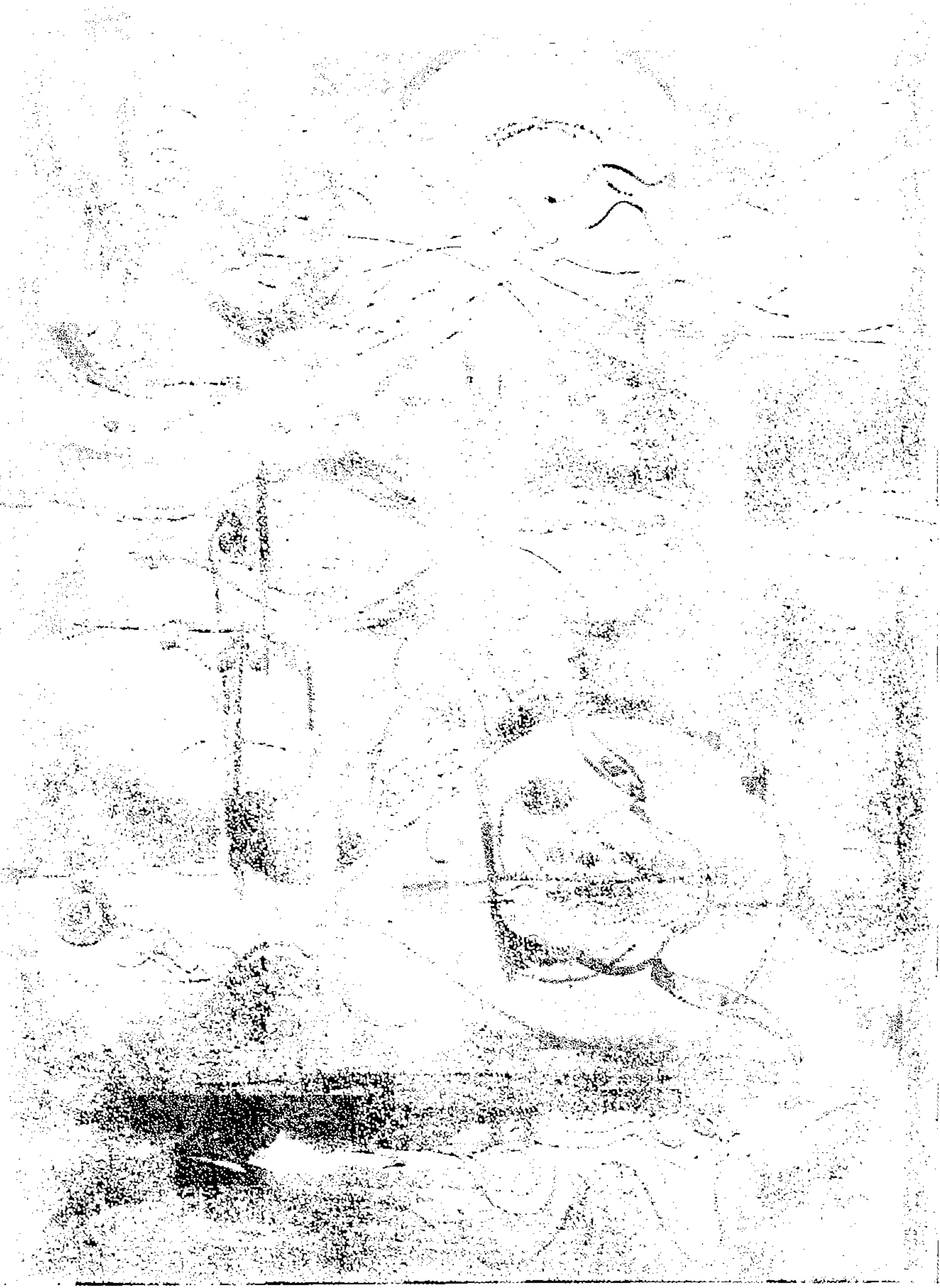
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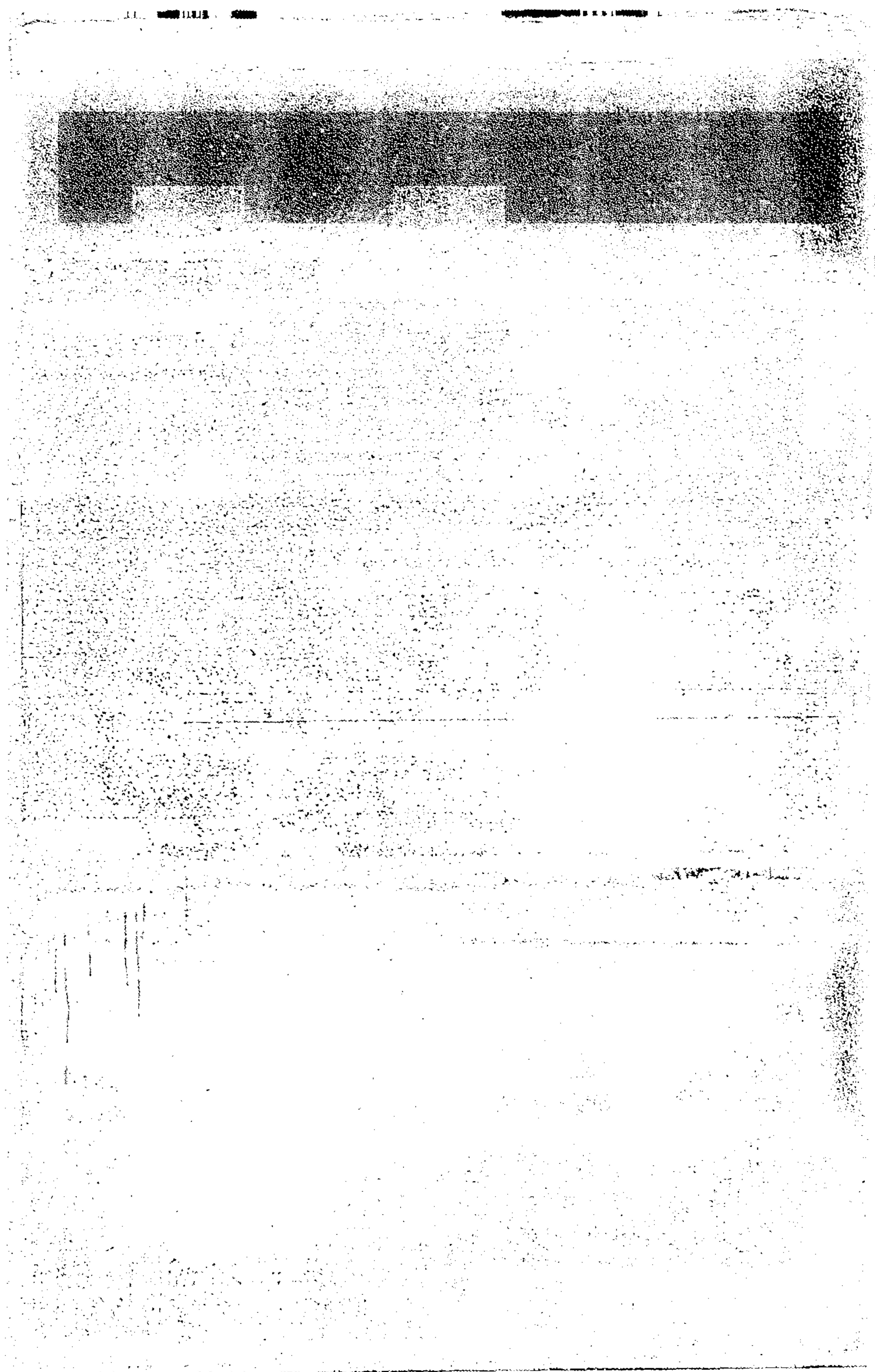
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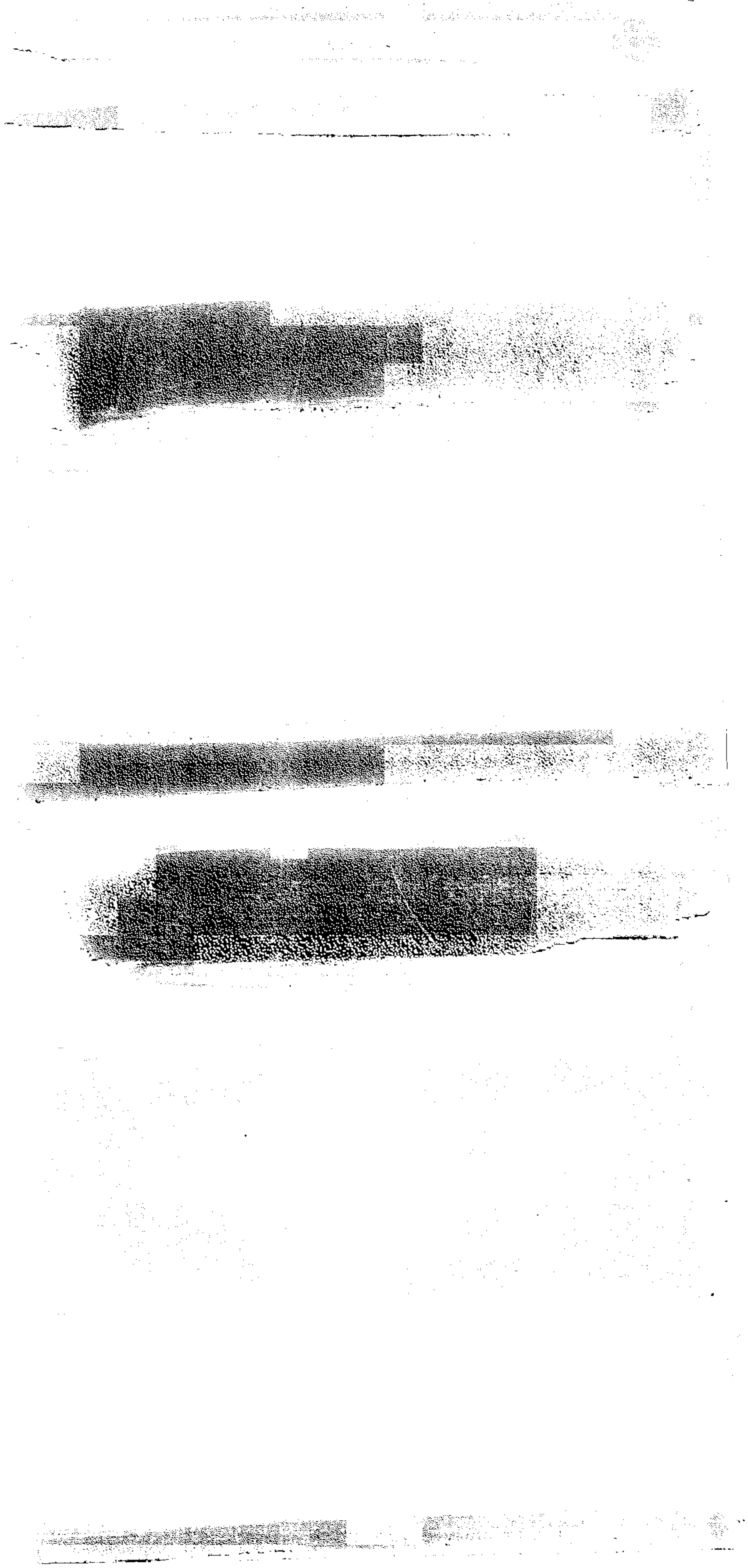
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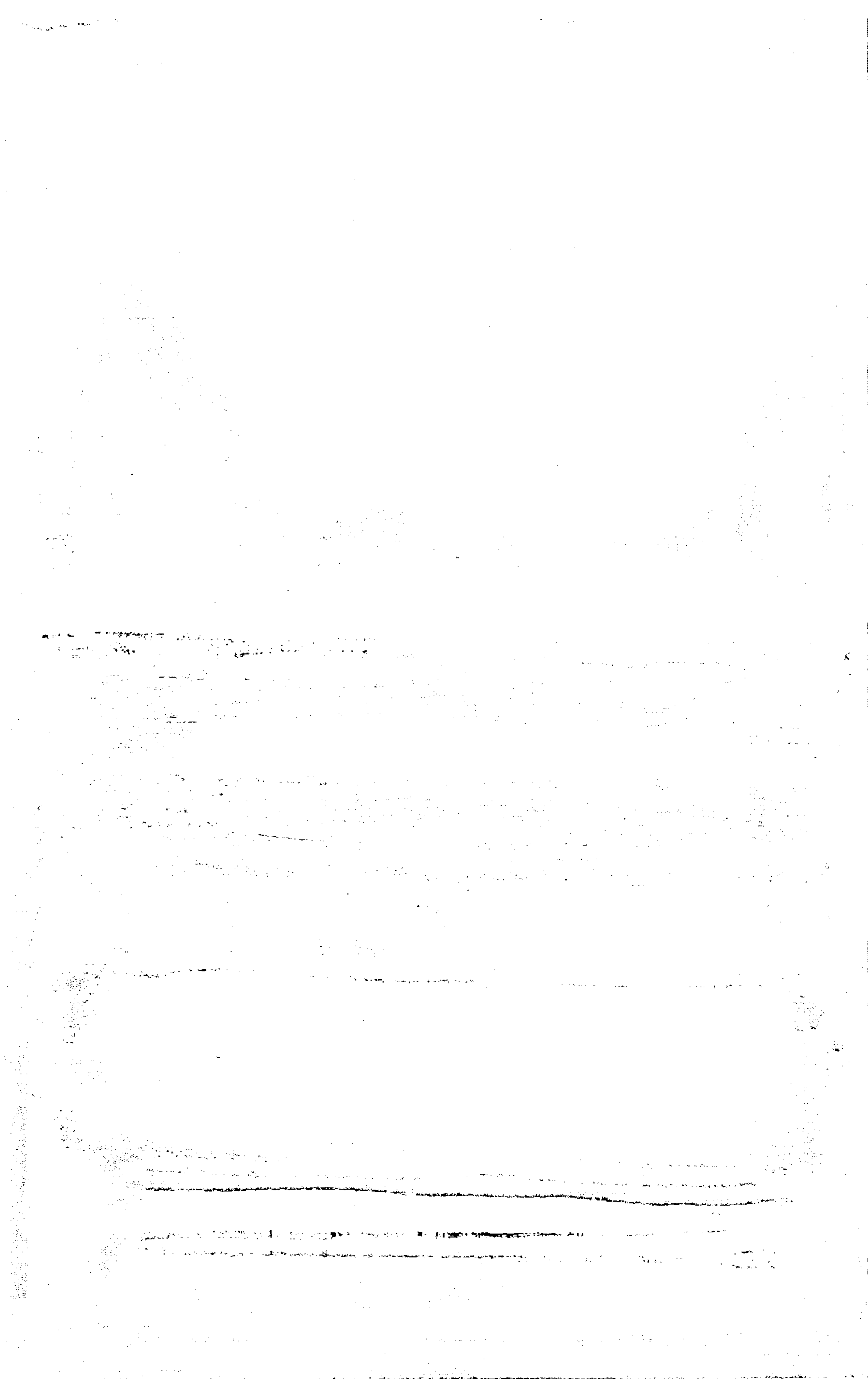
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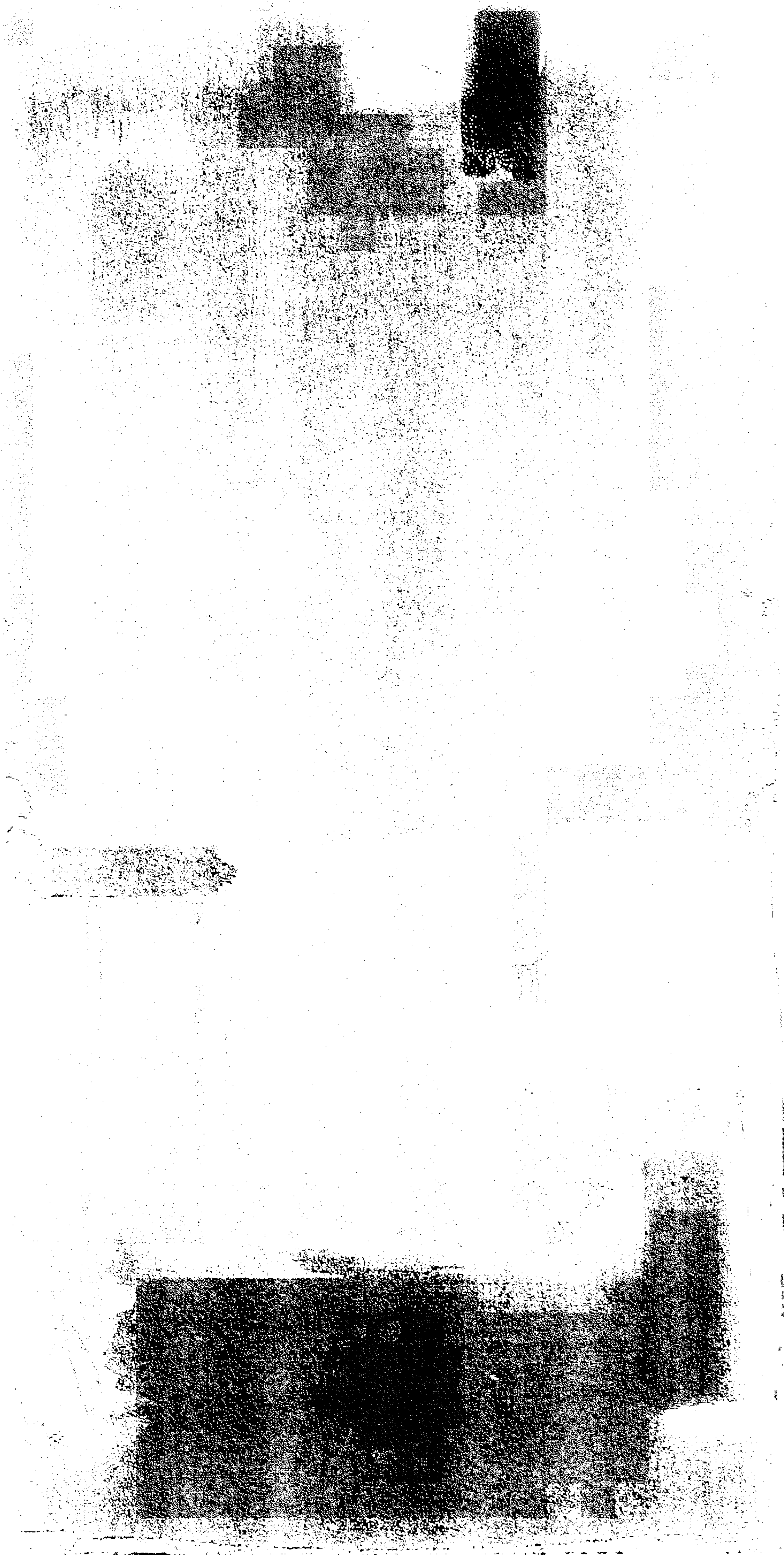


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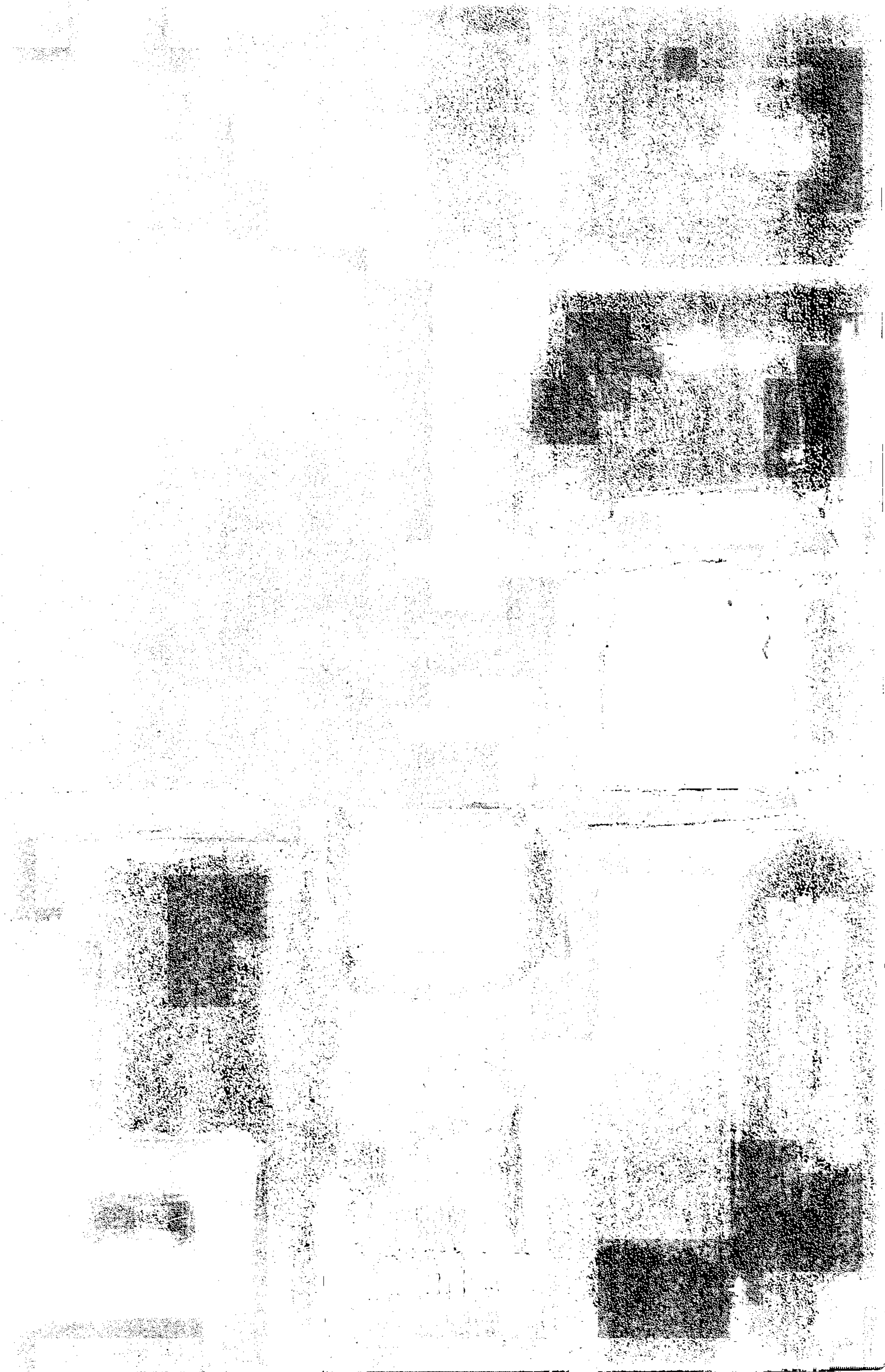


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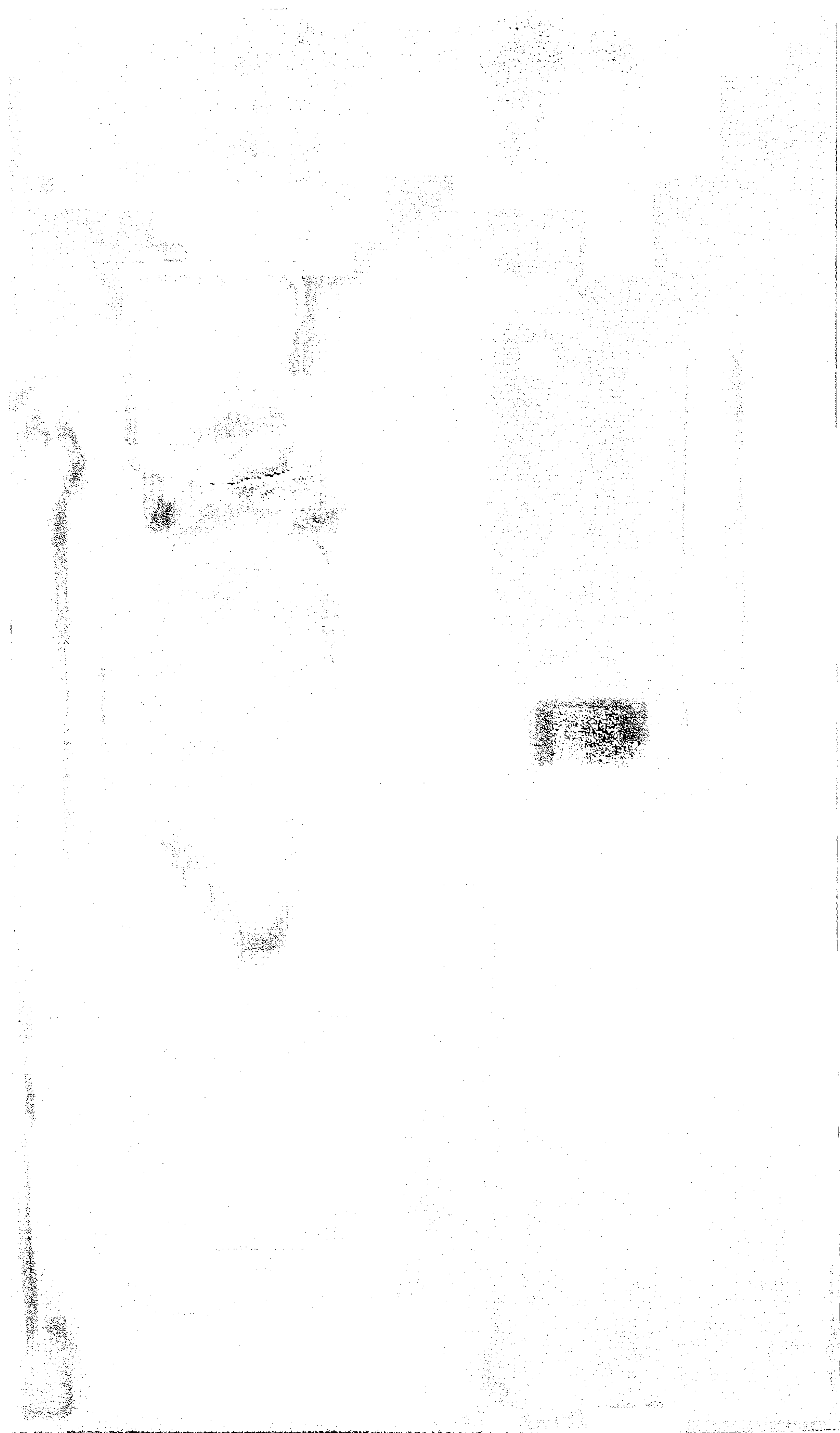
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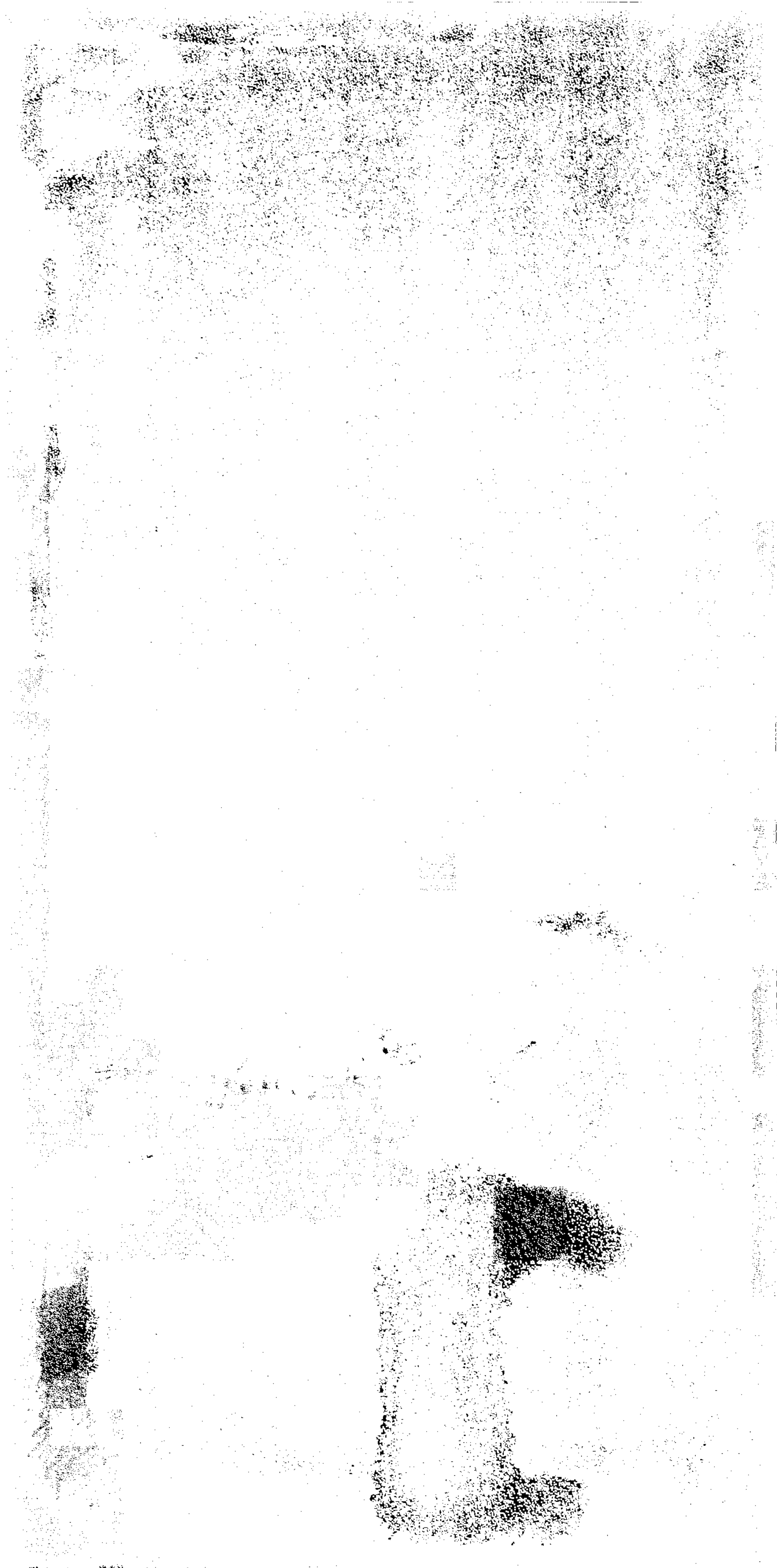
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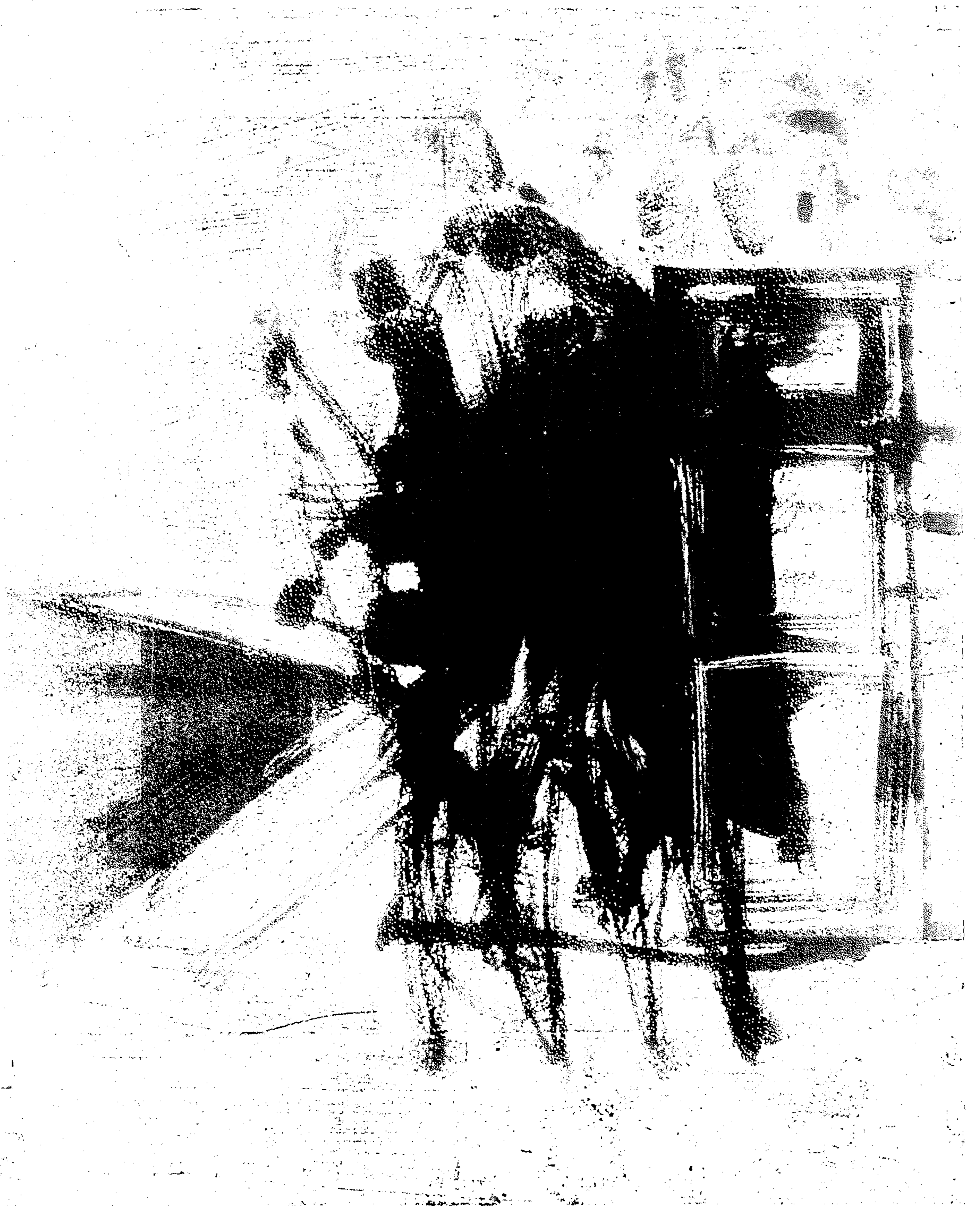
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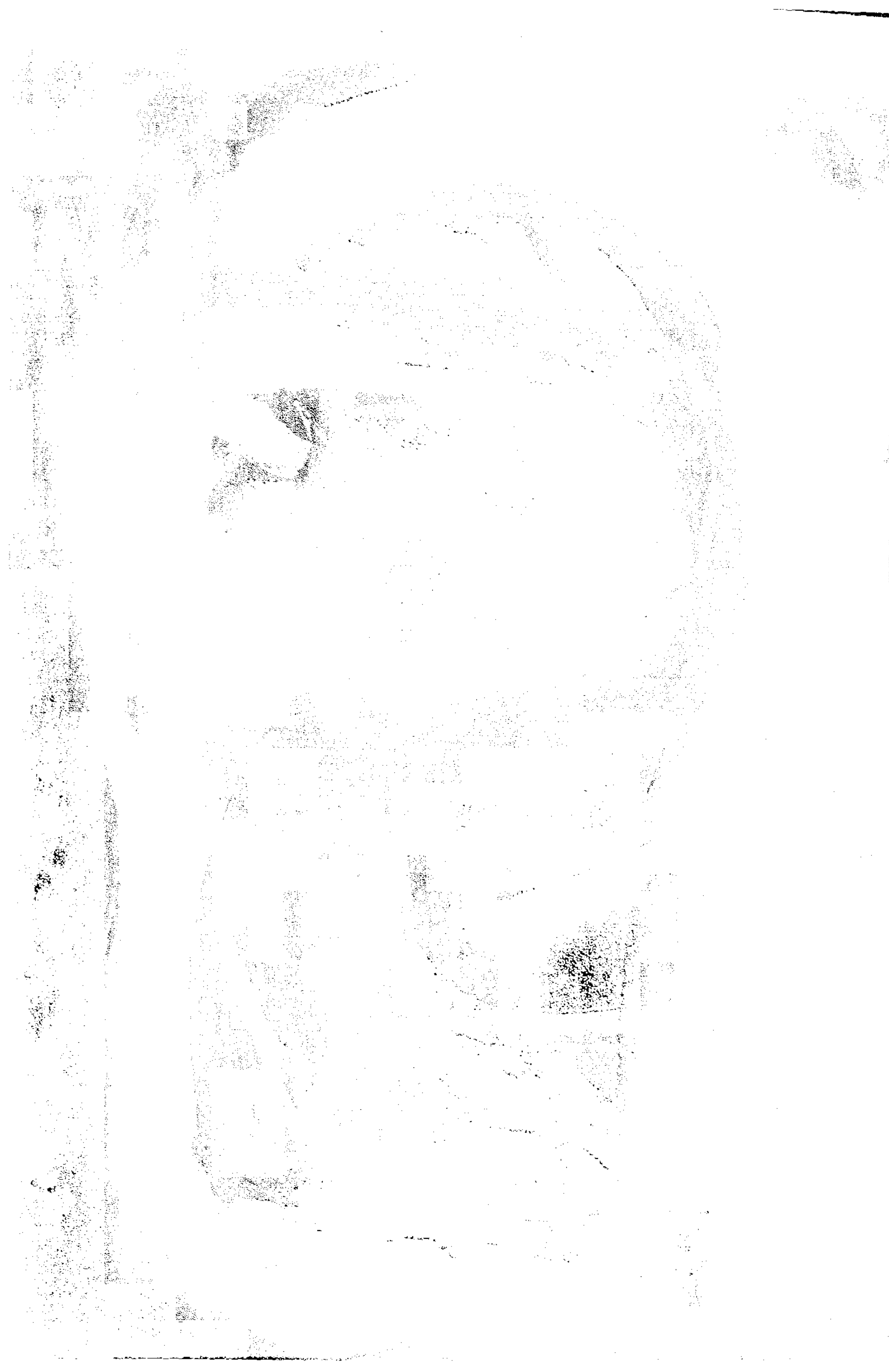
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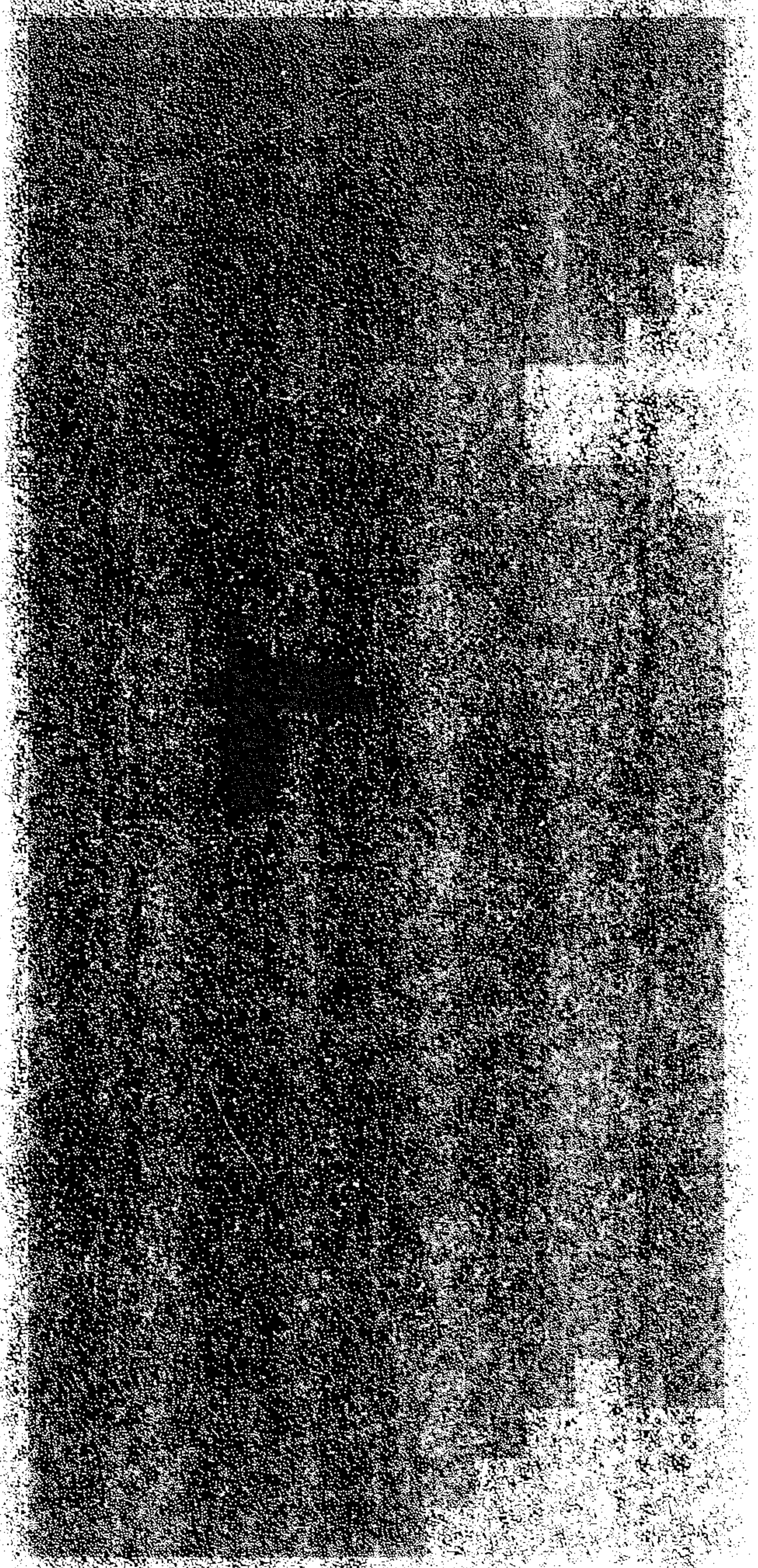
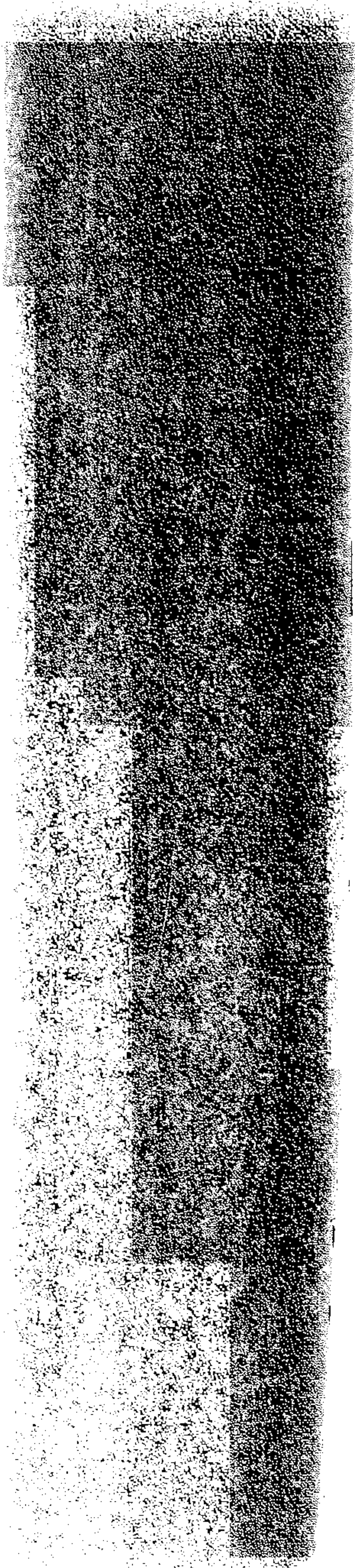




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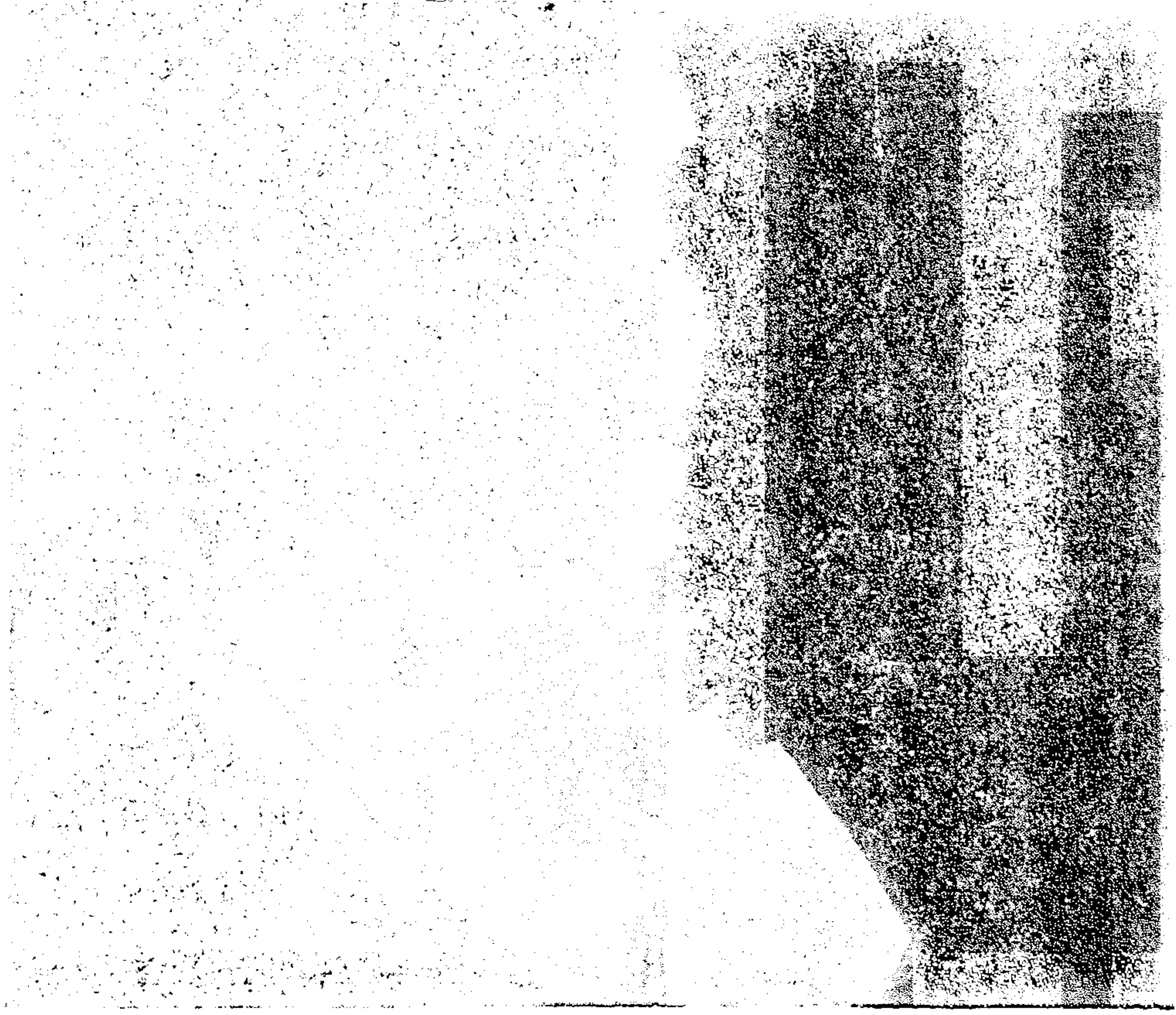


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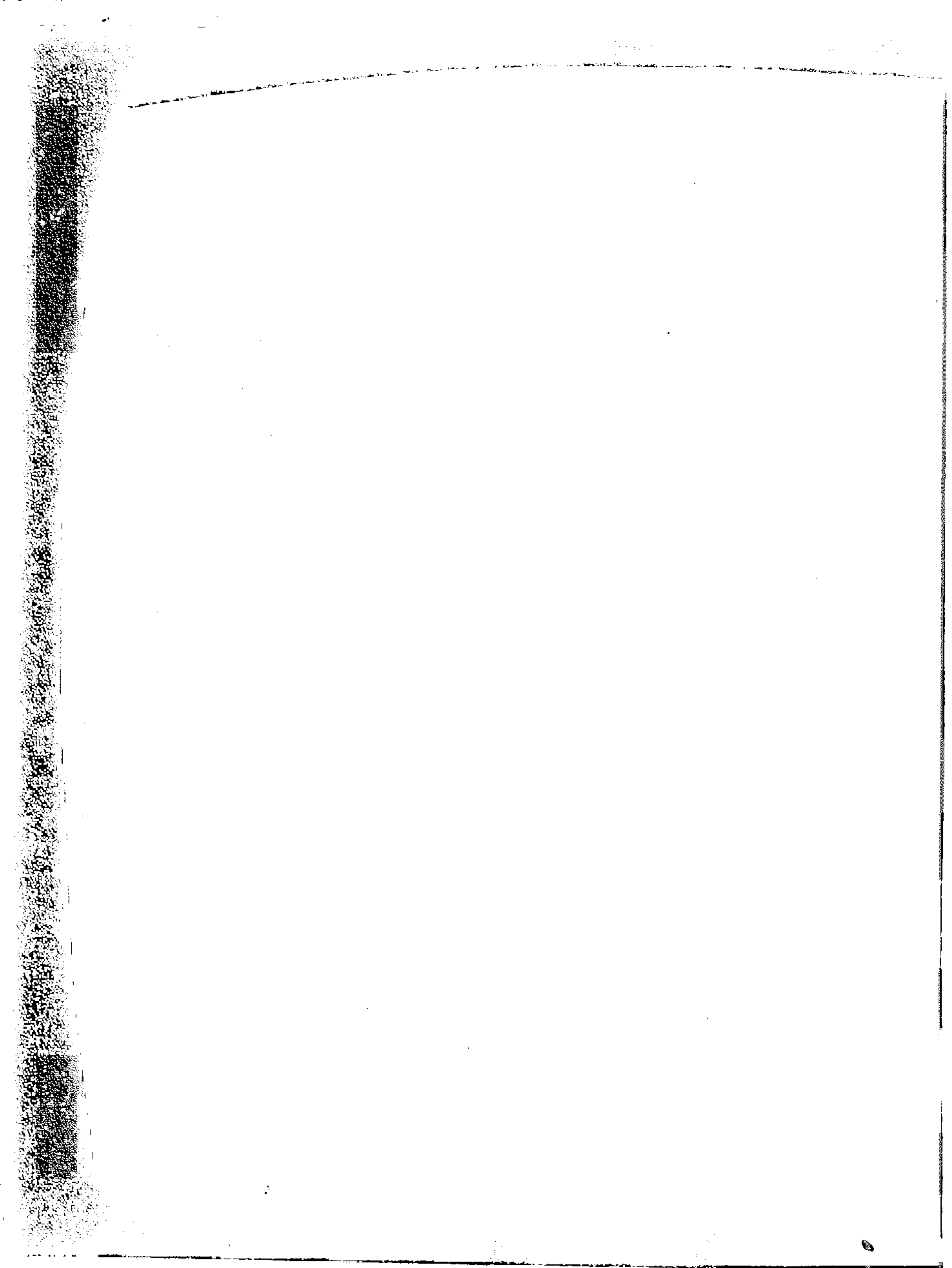
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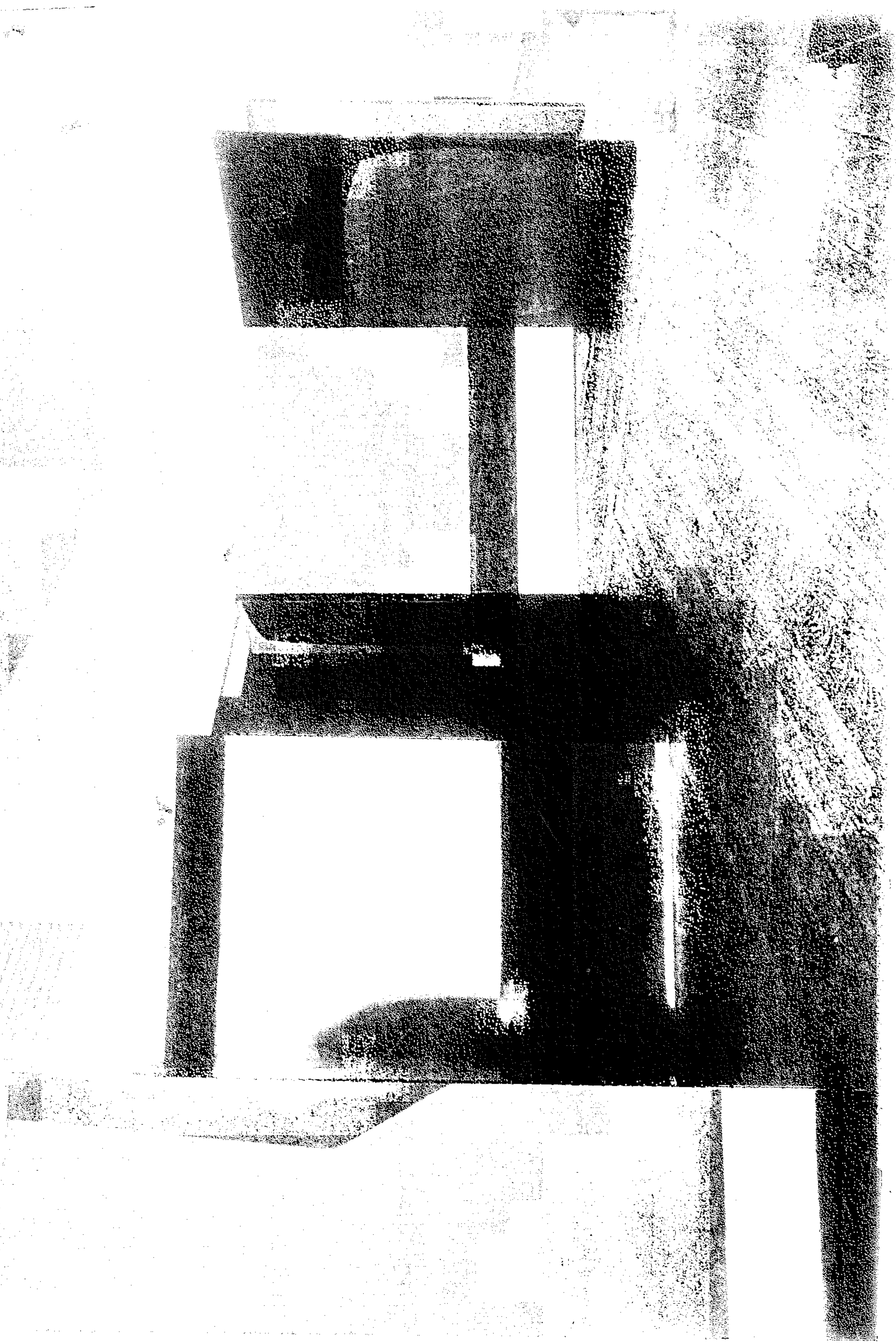
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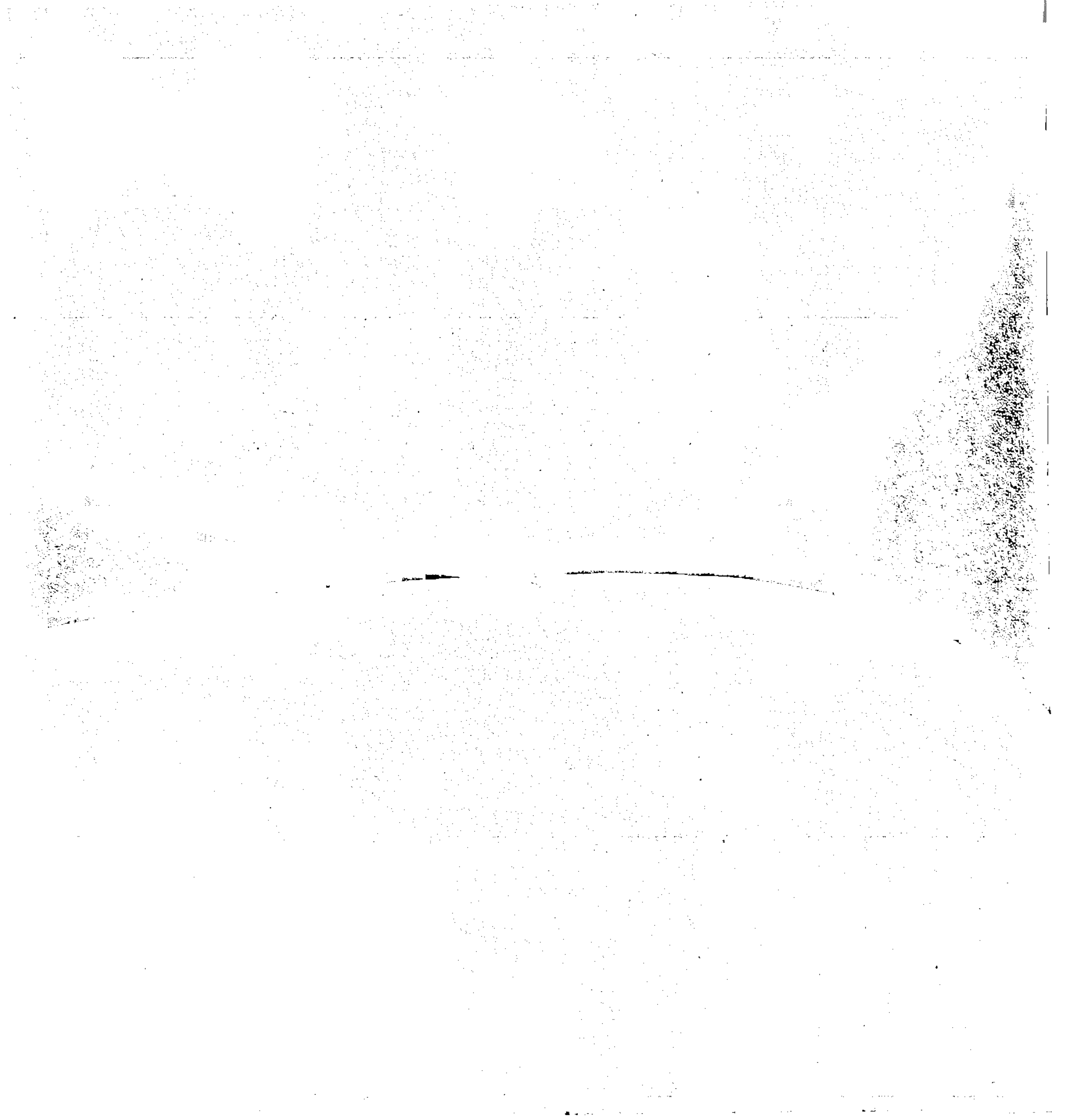


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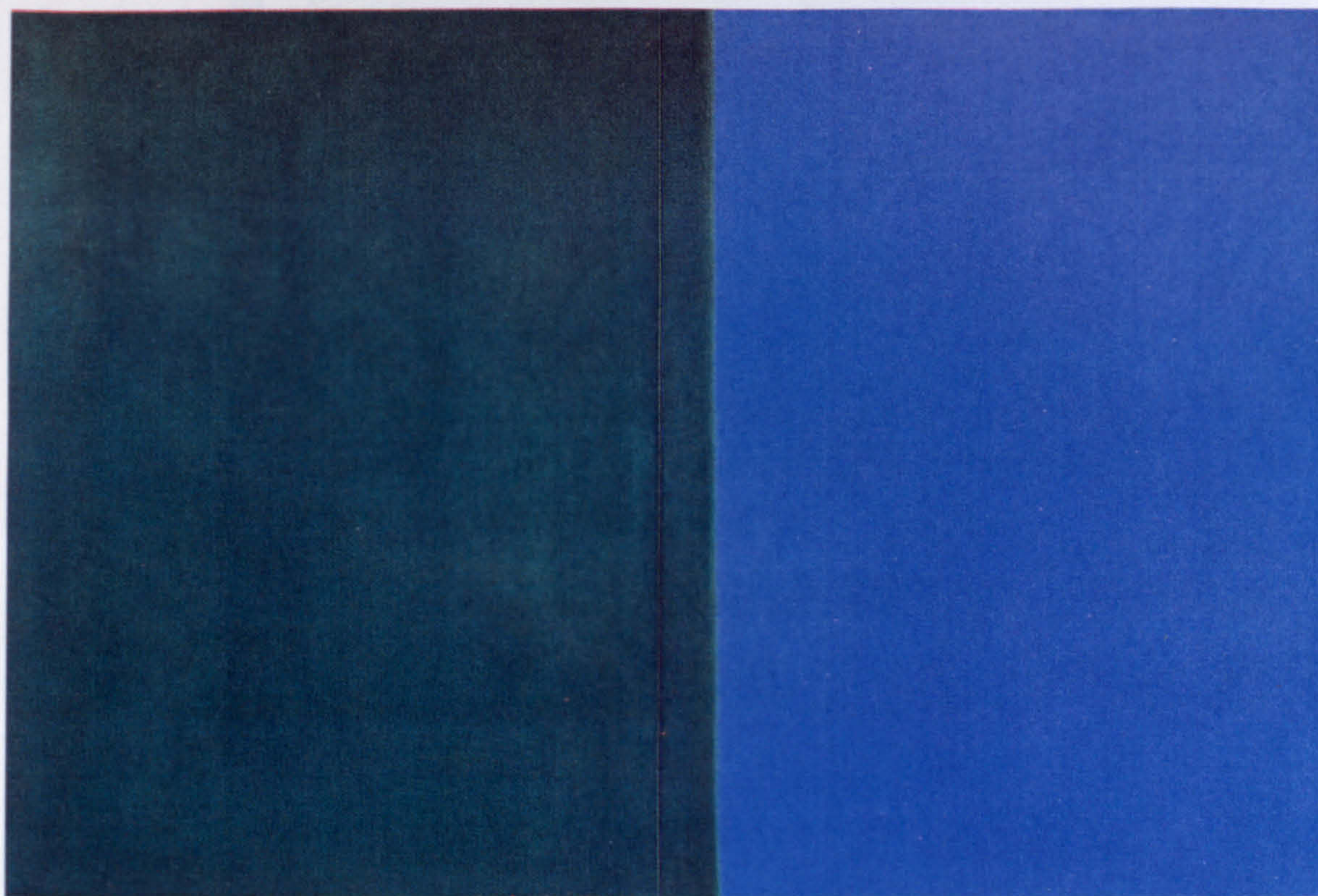


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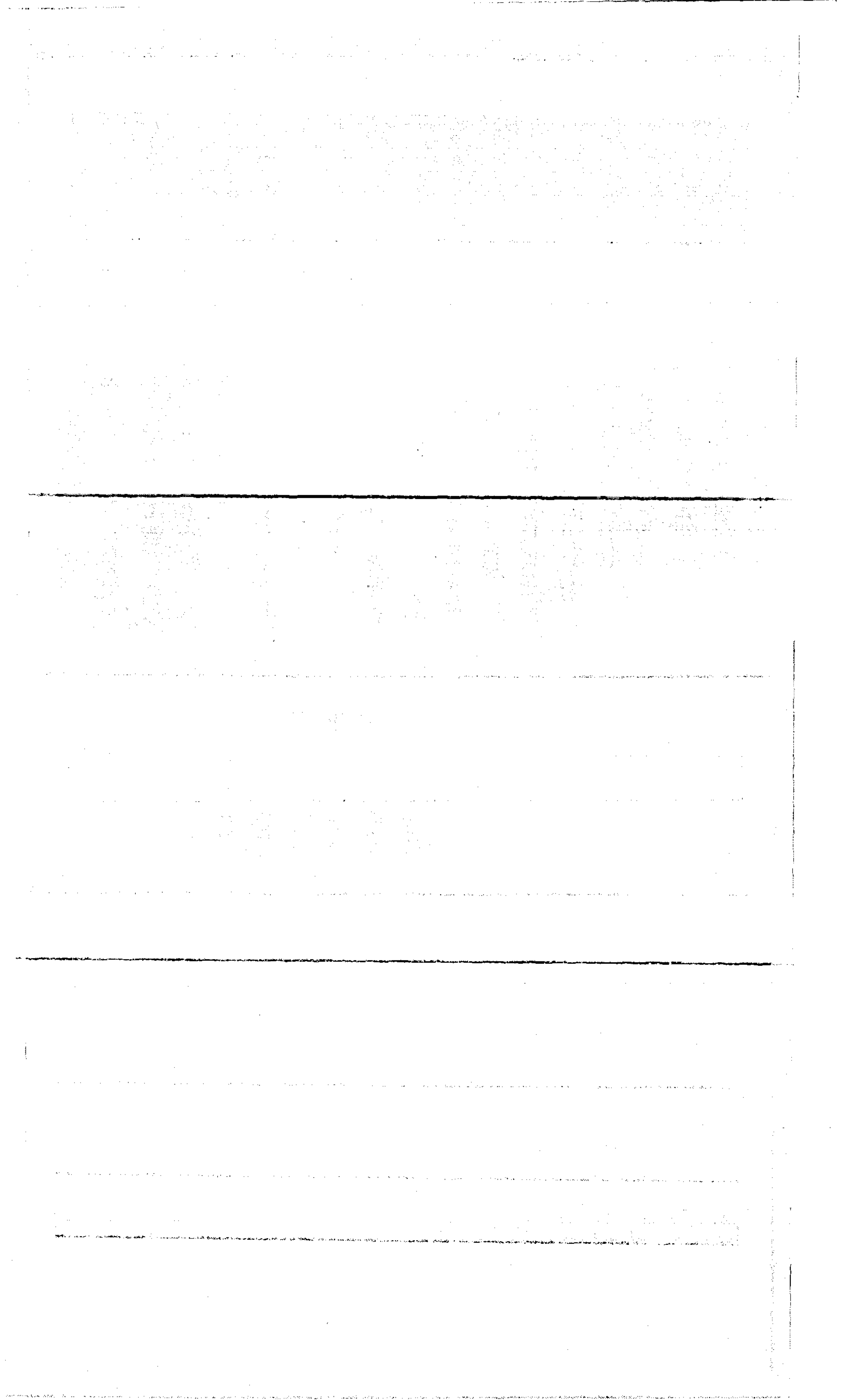


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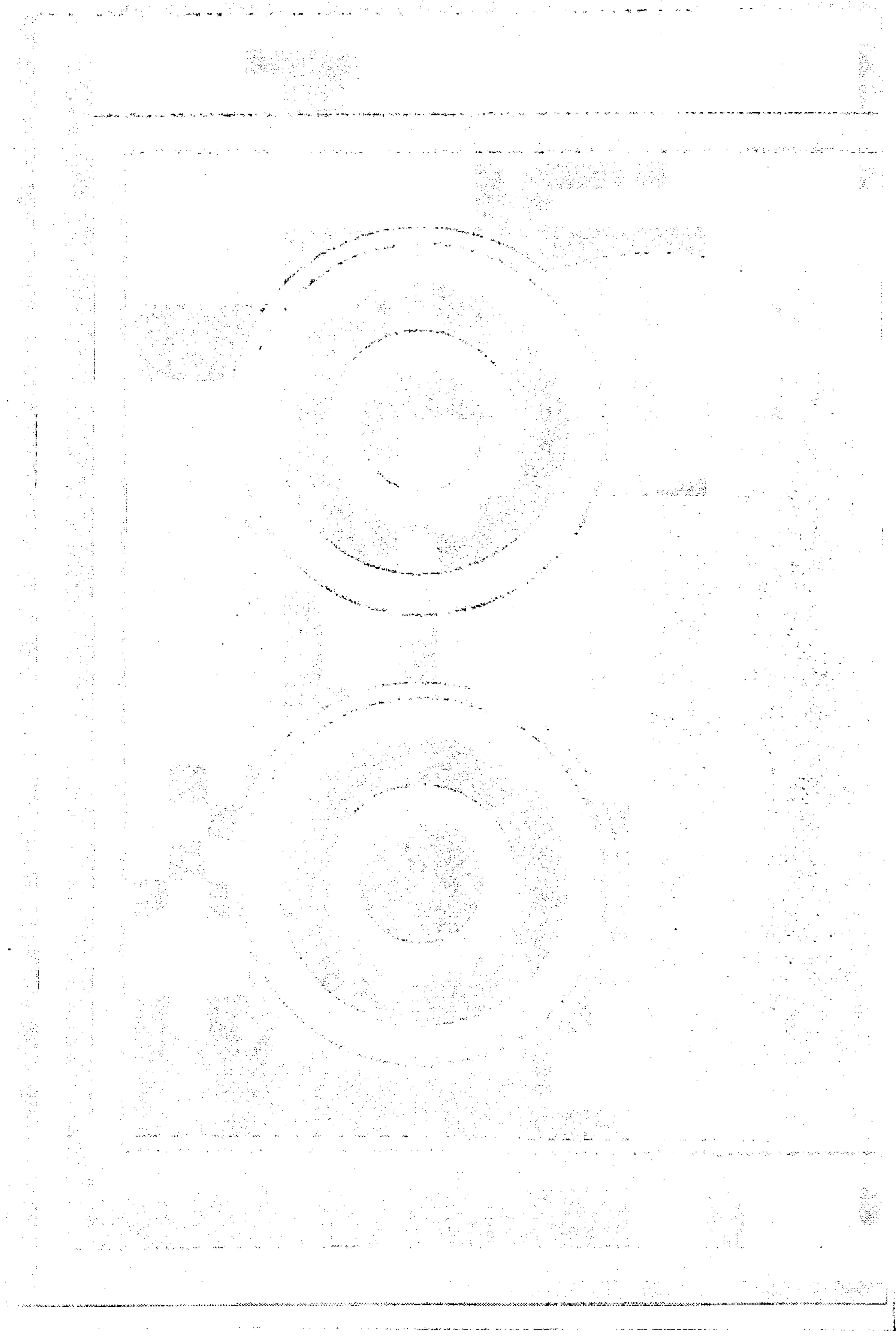


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